



JENNAE VALE

Prequel to
The Green Sky Series

The Dagger

Raider of the Deep

A Pirates of Britannia World Novel

Jennae Vale



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The Legend of the Pirates of Britannia

IN THE YEAR of our Lord 854, a wee lad by the name of Arthur MacAlpin set out on an adventure that would turn the tides of his fortune, for what could be more exciting than being feared and showered with gold?

Arthur wanted to be king. A sovereign as great as King Arthur, who came hundreds of years before him. The legendary knight who was able to pull a magical sword from stone, met ladies in lakes and vanquished evil, who had a vast following that worshipped him. But while that King Arthur brought to mind dreamlike images of a roundtable surrounded by chivalrous knights and the ladies they romanced, MacAlpin wanted to summon night terrors from every babe, woman, and man.

Aye, MacAlpin, King of the Pirates of Britannia, would be a name most feared. A name that crossed children's lips when the candles were blown out at night. When a shadow passed over a wall, was it the Pirate King? When a ship sailed into port in the dark hours of night, was it him?

As the fourth son of the conquering Pictish King, Cináed, Arthur wanted to prove himself to his father. He wanted to make his father proud, and show him that he, too, could be a conqueror. King Cináed was praised widely for having run off the Vikings, for saving his people, for amassing a vast and strong army. No one would dare encroach on his conquered lands when they would have to face the end of his blade.

Arthur wanted that, too. He wanted to be feared. Awed. To hold his sword up and have devils come flying from the tip.

So, it was on a fateful summer night in 854 that, at the age of ten and nine, Arthur amassed a crew of young and roguish Picts and stealthily commandeered one of his father's ships. They blackened the

sails to hide them from those on watch and began an adventure that would last a lifetime and beyond.

The lads trolled the seas, boarding ships and sacking small coastal villages. In fact, they even sailed so far north as to raid a Viking village in the name of his father. By the time they returned to Oban, and the seat of King Cináed, all of Scotland was raging about Arthur's atrocities. Confused, he tried to explain, but his father would not listen and would not allow him back into the castle.

King Cináed banished his youngest son from the land, condemned his acts as evil, and told him he never wanted to see him again.

Enraged and experiencing an underlying layer of mortification, Arthur took to the seas, gathering men as he went, and building a family he could trust that would not shun him. They ravaged the sea as well as the land—using his clan's name as a lasting insult to his father for turning him out.

The legendary Pirate King was rumored to be merciless, the type of vengeful pirate who would drown a babe in his mother's own milk if she didn't give him the pearls at her neck. As with most rumors, they were mostly steeped in falsehoods meant to intimidate. In fact, there may have been a wee boy or two he saved from an untimely fate. Whenever they came across a lad or lass in need, as Arthur himself had once been, he and his crew took them into the fold.

One ship became two. And then three, four, five, until a score of ships with blackened sails roamed the seas.

These were his warriors. A legion of men who adored him, respected him, followed him, and, together, they wreaked havoc on the blood ties that had sent him away. And generation upon generation, country upon country, they would spread far and wide until people feared them from horizon to horizon. Every Pirate King to follow would be named MacAlpin, so his father's banishment would never be forgotten.

Forever lords of the sea. A daring brotherhood, where honor among thieves reigns supreme, and crushing their enemies is a thrilling pastime.

These are the Pirates of Britannia, and here are their stories...



Chapter One

Manta Cay, the Caribbean, 1720

AMARO PARGO BURST through the doors into Governor Wickham's office. From the startled expression on Wickham's face, he'd accomplished his goal of frightening the man before he'd even uttered a word.

"Pargo!" The governor was apparently doing his best to get his voice under control, but it wavered and waffled as he spoke. "To what do I owe this great honor? You know I never have meetings here in my home. I would have been happy to meet you in town."

"No need. My business is here, with you." Pargo moved around the room, taking in the extensive library, the fine leather chairs, and the desk where Wickham sat.

His first mate, Agustin, had already positioned himself beside Wickham, flintlock pistol drawn.

Moving with the grace of a cat, Pargo was across the room in three strides, leaning across the desk only inches from the governor's face. "You have something that belongs to me, and I wish to have it back."

Wickham sat, mouth agape, while Pargo smiled and continued to speak softly, as if chatting with an old friend. "Well, have you nothing to say?"

"I don't know what you mean? I have nothing of yours," Wickham stammered, glancing quickly at Agustin and then back to Pargo.

"I don't believe you, sir." Pargo spoke with certainty.

He was sure the man knew exactly what he meant. He took a turn around the room, examining the books neatly lining shelf after shelf, the fine crystal decanters filled with wine and whisky, and finally plopping himself into an overstuffed leather chair in front of the desk. His steely gaze was locked on Wickham, who squirmed in his seat.

"I've never boarded your ship," Wickham protested.

"I never said you were on my ship," Pargo growled.

Wickham glanced around the room, perhaps searching for a way to escape.

A cynical smile appeared on Pargo's face. "That is where I kept my treasure and now it is gone."

"What makes you think I took it?"

"You are the governor. You know everything that happens on Manta Cay. You also have your hand in the pocket of every pirate that sets foot on your island."

"You've never paid me to dock *Las Animas* here." The governor sat up taller in his chair, his voice stronger than before. He seemed to be getting his courage up. "You refused."

"And that angered you," Pargo said, running his fingers across the smooth wood of the desk.

"It is only the tax I collect from everyone who docks a ship here, but I understand that you, being the very important man you are, did not wish to pay." Pargo was a hero in his homeland of Spain and on Tenerife, the island he called home. He was also a renowned pirate feared by anyone who'd ever heard his name and knew of his exploits.

"And so, you took my treasure instead."

"No." The governor stood and walked around his desk to stand in the center of the room. Agustin followed.

"Guyton!" A female voice came from somewhere in the house.

"Who is that?" Pargo asked.

"One of the servants," Wickham said, appearing even more nervous and distraught.

"It's his daughter," Agustin said.

"You have a daughter?" Pargo asked.

"Yes, but she's not here." His distress was evident. Perhaps this daughter could be of use.

"Agustin, find his daughter and bring her here. Perhaps she will convince her father to tell me where my treasure is."

"No. Please. I'll tell you everything," Wickham pleaded. He glanced nervously toward Agustin.

A shot rang out, and the governor fell to the carpeted floor. Pargo's sharp gaze focused on his first mate. "Agustin, you've shot him."

Agustin shrugged. "It was an accident. A slip of the finger." He placed the pistol back in his belt and pulled out another.

The governor was mortally wounded and sprawled out on the floor at his feet. He'd never get the information he sought from him now. He quickly rifled through the papers on the desk and seeing nothing, he turned to Agustin.

"You are a fool!" he snarled.

“Papa!” the voice of Wickham’s daughter came to them from a distance. “What was that sound?”

“We must hide,” Pargo said.

The two men opened the double windows that led out onto a small balcony. A large tree was close enough for them to climb into it and then drop to the ground beneath. If the girl found them, they would have to deal with her, but for now, they would wait safely hidden from view.



THE DOORS TO Governor Wickham’s library flew open, and Lizette Wickham ran into the room. The sight of her father on the floor confirmed her worst fears. “Papa!” She dropped to her knees by his side. “Guyton!” she called as loudly as she could. Her father clutched her hand with a ferocity that surprised her. Lizette knew he was dying although she was hoping a miracle would occur. Blood oozed from the wound in his chest, seeping into the carpet. The papers on his ornate desk were strewn across the floor. Whoever had done this was searching for something, but what?

Governor Wickham gasped for breath, trying to speak as his grip on Lizette’s hand tightened even more.

“No, Father. Do not speak. Guyton!” she yelled. Where was her father’s servant? Why wasn’t he answering her?

Tears rolled down her cheeks, dropping onto her father’s hand that she now held close to her heart.

“Lizette...” he muttered along with a stream of incoherent words. She thought he’d said something about danger and treasure, but it made no sense. Then, in a moment of clarity and with a burst of strength, he said something that sent shivers through her. “Rourke Mackall.” She’d heard the name before. He was a pirate. His fearsome reputation was well known in these parts.

“What about him, Father? Is he the man who shot you?” She lowered her head, hoping to hear him better.

He opened his mouth one last time to speak but nothing came out. His eyes closed and his body went limp. He was gone. She held his hand to her lips, kissing it as her body shuddered with a type of pain she’d never experienced in all her years. She and her brother Daniel were alone in the world. It was just the two of them now. They had no one else.

Sobbing from grief, Lizette’s heart nearly burst when the sound of pounding footsteps entered the room and a tall, dark-haired man walked toward her. Nothing about him seemed threatening, but the man who accompanied him held a pistol in his hand and had a

dangerous glint in his eyes.

"We heard the gunshot as we approached. We were to meet with the governor about some business." The man gazed down at Lizette and her father. Is he...?"

"He is dead," Lizette cried.

"What is your name, my dear?"

"Lizette. I'm his daughter."

"Lizette, come, we must leave. You are in danger here." He held out a hand to her.

Was that what her father had been trying so desperately to tell her? Even still, she didn't know this man. His heavily accented English told her he was Spanish, and from the looks of him, a pirate. His companion's appearance only confirmed it. She couldn't go with him.

"No. I cannot leave my brother."

"Do not worry. He will come with us. We will take you aboard *Las Animas*. You will be safe there."

"But, my father." He took her arm, lifting her from the floor to stand beside him.

"Quickly now. Guyton will take care of your father's body. Whoever did this may still be nearby."

"But..." She struggled to free herself, finding she didn't have the strength. "Who are you?"

"My men call me Pargo, but you can call me *Tío*."

"*Tío*?"

"*Sí*. Uncle." He offered her a sad smile. "We will avenge your father's murder. You will see. We will talk more about what has happened once we are aboard *Las Animas*."

"*Las Animas*?" Lizette asked. Her head was spinning as she was hurried down the stairs to the sitting room where Guyton stood waiting with Daniel.

"Guyton, Papa is upstairs. He is..." She glanced at Daniel. She had to tell him. She tried to shake her arm free, but the man's iron grip held her in place.

"Lizzie!" Daniel ran to her, wrapping his arms around her waist, fear in his voice.

"It's all right, Daniel." She took a deep breath and gathered her wits. Daniel needed her now, more than ever. "We are going to go with these men to visit their ship." She was about to leave the house she'd called home her entire life.

She glanced at Guyton, silently pleading with him for help. He'd been her father's servant far longer than she'd been alive. He was too old to do anything to stop what had happened or what was happening now, but he knew who to trust, and if she was reading him correctly, it wasn't Pargo.

“Did your father say anything before he passed?” Pargo asked in a low voice.

“Only a name,” she quietly answered.

“What was it?”

“Rourke Mackall.”

“*Dios mío*. I suspected as much.”

She pulled Daniel close, covering his ears with her hands. “What do you mean? Did he kill my father?” She struggled to keep from shouting in anger. She had to remember Daniel had no idea what was happening. She would tell him as soon as they were alone, but for now, it was best to keep it from him.

“I’m afraid so, *mi pequeña flor*.” His voice sounded sad, but she wasn’t sure he was. His dark, penetrating gaze gave her no indication of what he might be thinking.

“Do you think he wishes to kill us?” she asked, indicating herself and her brother.

“Do not fear. Your father would want you to go with me. I will see to your safety.”

But she did fear, and wasn’t sure she should believe him. She didn’t know this man. Her father never mentioned him.

“My things. Daniel’s things. Couldn’t we go back upstairs to pack?”

“My men will retrieve them.” His patience seemed to be wearing thin the more she spoke.

He shouted orders to his men in Spanish, and they scrambled to do his bidding. Lizette noted they filled large bags with objects they passed along the way, and then climbed the stairs to the bedrooms. She thought about breaking free, but knew it would be futile. Lizette didn’t need anyone to tell her that Pargo was a dangerous man. Her life and her brother’s life depended on her ability to do what she needed to keep them alive.

Holding tight to Daniel, they were hurried through the house, out the door, and into a waiting carriage, which would take them to the docks of Manta Cay. She took one last look back at Guyton who stood like a statue by the front doors where she’d spent many a happy day.

Her mother had passed when she was quite young, and Lizette had no memory of her at all. Many years later, her father remarried. Sarah Wickham hadn’t been much older than Lizette at the time. She was a pretty but frail woman who’d died giving birth to Daniel, her baby brother. The small, perfect baby had become Lizette’s to care for and raise.

She was much older than him, so it was only natural for her to assume the maternal role. It was also easy. Daniel was a sweet and lovable babe. Hardly ever crying or fussing, and almost always wearing a bright smile on his face. The jostling of the carriage across

the heavily-rutted road broke her thoughts of the past. She glanced at Daniel who sat close by her side. He had to be her main focus now. How would she tell him what had happened? Who would care for them? So many questions, so few answers.

They were at the docks in what seemed the blink of an eye, and as they emerged, people catching sight of Pargo either ran out of his way or gazed on him with a combination of fear and respect. Lizette had always been sheltered. Her father wanted it that way. She never came this way. Her father warned her of the types of people she would meet by the docks, putting fear in her heart.

The heart that now beat so quickly, she thought it might burst from her chest. If Lizette wished to venture anyplace other than the seashore near the house, she was to be accompanied by his soldiers. She searched the faces of the strangers she passed along the way, hoping to see those very soldiers, to seek their protection and help, but they were missing. Daniel gripped her hand and rested his head on her arm as they walked. Her heart was breaking. Her father was dead, murdered by an unknown assailant, and Lizette found herself being forced to trust someone she knew nothing about, and helpless to do anything other than go with this man who'd offered his protection.



ONCE ABOARD *Las Animas* and in the captain's quarters, Lizette realized they were not going to be left alone. She began searching for the words to tell Daniel their father was dead. Pargo stood behind her, his hand on her shoulder. Was there real sympathy there? It was hard to tell. Everything was so raw and new that it was difficult to tell the difference between reality and what was imagined.

"Where is Papa, Lizzie?" Daniel asked, his eyes pleading, and giving her no choice but to tell him the truth.

"Daniel, I have some bad news," she said, her voice was softened by the sadness she felt as her throat constricted and ached from holding back her tears.

Gazing up into her face, Daniel immediately began to cry. "He's dead, isn't he?" His little body quivered in her arms.

Pargo guided them to a settee. Lizette sat and took Daniel's hands in hers. "I'm so sorry."

"What will we do?" he asked.

She had no answer. "Don't worry, Daniel. I'll take care of you."

"As will I," Pargo added, much to Lizette's surprise.

She was having a hard time believing that to be true, and an even harder time seeing Pargo as their benefactor.

"Tomas!" he called out.

A young lad entered the captain's quarters. "Si," he said. Pargo addressed him in Spanish, and the boy nodded his understanding before turning to leave.

"He will bring us some tea and biscuits." A warm smile crossed his lips as he ruffled Daniel's hair and then patted Lizette's hand, which confused her even more.

Lizette didn't reply. There was nothing to say. Her life was forever changed, and it frightened her to think of where it may now be headed. One thing was certain, she would not allow this man to take her away from Manta Cay, and she would die before she allowed any harm to come to Daniel.



Chapter Two

HE WAS HEADING back to Manta Cay after a long stay at the Scottish stronghold, Scarba Island, where he spent time with his brethren, The Devils of the Deep. Often thought of by outsiders as a den of vipers, thieves, and murderous ruffians, to Rourke Mackall, it had been a safe haven when he wasn't aboard his ship, *The Dagger*. He'd arrived there a young lad in search of adventure.

Descended from Nick Mackall of Dunnet Head, Rourke had heard tales passed down through the years of Nick's escapades and feats of heroism. Rourke longed to be like Nick, but found life at Dunnet Head didn't have the level of excitement he was seeking. He'd also heard tales of a legendary Scottish pirate named Shaw MacDougall. Those stories appealed to Rourke, sounding more to his liking than life at Dunnet Head. So, he left home and headed to the nearest port where he became the cabin boy on what turned out to be a pirate ship.

It wouldn't have stopped him boarding even if he'd known. The life of a pirate seemed to be just what a young buck like Rourke was searching for. The captain, covered in scars, appeared to have been shot and stabbed so many times it was a miracle he was still breathing. He treated Rourke well, but warned him if he disobeyed orders, he'd flog him to within an inch of his life. Rourke never tested him, fully believing every word of the threat.

Over the years, Rourke found all the adventure he'd ever hoped for, both at sea and on Scarba Island. The Devils of the Deep became his family and Scarba his home. He impressed many there with his fearlessness and ability to be a leader in battle. He was rewarded with his own ship, a Dutch sloop plundered by The Devils of the Deep and now called *The Dagger*. It was a fine vessel, sixty feet in length bearing a crew of seventy-five.

Standing on the quarterdeck, Rourke could see that the inlet to Manta Cay was in sight. It, too, was safe harbor, but where Scarba was home to his Scottish brethren, this island was home to all pirates. Ships from across the oceans were docked here in a port where Governor William Wickham managed to keep the peace and collect a small payment from each ship that arrived in this port. He called it a tax, but Rourke understood only part of what was collected went to the English crown, while the rest remained in Wickham's possession. And why not? The port was thriving despite the fact it had become a pirate port of call and the English were none the wiser.

The turquoise waters and bright blue skies dotted with white clouds, were his welcome to the island of green, rolling hills, a bustling harbor, and docks filled with men loading and unloading ships. Rourke skillfully navigated his boat to a spot far enough away from the dozen or so other ships waiting to dock. Hawes, Rourke's first mate, directed the crew to drop anchor and ready a skiff for their captain. While Rourke took care of business, his men would be tasked with replenishing their stores of supplies and seeking news about other ships in port and still at sea. His cabin boy, Jamie, along with Hawes, would stay aboard with a small number of men to guard *The Dagger* and its contents.

"Jamie, follow orders or ye'll answer to me when I return." The lad reminded him of himself when he was a young'un, so he was well aware of the trouble Jamie could get himself into without stern guidance.

"Aye, Cap'n." A huge grin beamed across his face and was quickly replaced with a scowl when Hawes gave him the evil eye.

"Hawes, see that the men get time ashore. I'll return after my meeting with Wickham."

"Aye, Cap'n." He turned and began barking orders at the men on deck.

Rourke smiled to himself. Hawes would see that all work was finished first and then there would be time for the men to visit old friends and share some drink and news and perhaps, after such a long voyage, find a lass to see to their needs at Red Legs Tavern. If the ship's quartermaster, Lynk, had his way, the men would already be falling down drunk with little care for returning to *The Dagger* or their duties.

Rourke was a fair captain and had little trouble with his crew. They were all eager to do his bidding and rarely balked at his orders as conveyed through Hawes. They reaped the benefits of the ships they plundered. Any man who attempted to sow seeds of discontent was not long for *The Dagger*.

Manta Cay had a reputation as a place of freedom and friendship,

but Rourke chose to be cautious. The majority of those in the place were pirates, and it was his duty to protect his ship from anyone fool enough to board without consent.

Leaving his men to attend to the skiff, Rourke whistled a bright tune as he made his way through the crowded streets of the town. He was greeted by many who knew him and eyed suspiciously by those who didn't. He noted many people clustered together, some running from group to group to impart the latest news from others.

"What's going on?" he asked a man familiar to him from previous visits to the island.

"The governor's been shot. Rumor is he's dead."

"Thank ye," Rourke said.

He quickened his pace and once out of the dock area, broke into a run. If Wickham was dead, there would surely be chaos to follow. He had to find out if it was true. He hadn't seen his old friend in some time and had been looking forward to sharing a tot of whisky with him, but now it seemed unlikely that would happen. As he approached the governor's mansion, he noticed that a crowd had formed in the yard. He searched for Guyton among the people milling about.

"Guyton!" he shouted as he spied him at the base of the stairs leading to the doors.

Rourke pushed his way through the crowd of servants and soldiers until he reached Guyton. "What's going on?"

"The governor has been shot."

"Is he..."

"He is. Come with me." Guyton led him into the massive foyer of the home.

People called to Guyton as he showed Rourke inside.

"They want to know what will happen now. Who will be in charge."

"Tell me what happened."

"Some men came today to speak with him. I was in the kitchen when I heard a gunshot. Daniel was with me. I was unsure what had happened, and I hesitated before entering the house with the boy."

"Who were these men?" Rourke asked.

"I'm not sure. I did not see them arrive. I do not know if they were invited guests or not. The governor never met with anyone here. It was always at the tavern."

"Who saw them?"

"Maria, the housekeeper. She told me they were here, but I haven't seen her since. She was probably frightened and has gone into hiding."

Rourke took the stairs two at a time to the second floor where the

governor's office was located. The doors were open, and Wickham lay on the floor. His papers were strewn on the floor around him. A warm breeze caused them to flutter across the room, and Rourke noted the balcony doors were open, too. He took a step outside and glanced around.

"Where are the children?" he asked as the older man entered the room.

"Miss Lizette and young Daniel were taken."

"Taken? By who?"

"Pargo and his man. They arrived after the shooting. He said they were in danger and should not stay here."

Rourke didn't like the sound of that. Pargo was a notorious Spanish corsair. If he was here and took Lizette and Daniel, there could be no good reason for it. He scrubbed his hands through his hair. What could he want? "Guyton, I'm going to find them. I'll bring them back to the mansion. See that the governor is moved before I return. And find Maria."

"Of course."

He would head back to his ship, gather some of his men, find Pargo, and then discover who killed his friend. William Wickham had asked him on his last visit if he would do him the honor of caring for his children should anything happen to him. He'd promised he would. He never thought he would see the day when it would be necessary, but here it was. He would see to it that they were returned to London where they had family who would care for them, but first, he must find them. He prayed they were still alive.



"SO, ROURKE MACKALL has not only stolen my treasure, but he has also murdered your father. We must find him," Pargo said.

"But how?" Lizette asked. A certain numbness had come over her, blocking out her last moments with her beloved father. She was alone with Pargo. Daniel had been hungry, and one of Pargo's men took him to find something to eat.

"My men are in town where they will get answers for me. It is possible his business here is finished and he is no longer on the island. Once I know where he is, we will set sail to find him."

"We cannot go with you. We must stay here on Manta Cay to bury my father and await the arrival of the new governor."

"There will be no new governor," he said resolutely.

"I don't understand."

"The pirates will run the island. There is no need for an English governor. There was never any need for your father."

“Pirates? This is a merchant seaport. Only ships doing business with the king visit our shores.”

Pargo laughed. “Your father kept you sheltered from his dealings. There are no merchant ships here.”

“That can’t be. Father would never lie to us.”

“I have no doubt your father loved you and your brother, but he knew you would think less of him if you were aware of what really goes on at Manta Cay.”

Lizzie’s head was spinning. This couldn’t possibly be true. “You are a pirate?” It had been her first thought on seeing him back in her father’s office, but she had hoped he wasn’t. It was becoming clear, and as such, she and Daniel were in far more danger than she’d thought.

“Of course. All the ships you see in the harbor are pirate ships from every corner of the world.” He came closer, lifting her chin with his finger and gazing into her eyes. The deep black depths she saw there showed no sign of emotion. “I sense you are afraid. There is no need as long as you do what I ask.”

“What is that?” She pulled her head away from his touch.

He snickered. “I want you to befriend Mackall. He would never suspect you are not to be trusted.”

“I am very trustworthy, sir.”

“Please, I told you to call me *Tío*. I do not doubt you are trustworthy, but for my purposes, you will not be. You will find him and discover what he has done with my treasure.”

“Why don’t you find him yourself?” she asked.

“I do not wish to engage in battle with him, and that is what would happen.”

“Are you afraid of him?”

“Of course not. I fear *no* man.”

She tipped her head, waiting for him to continue.

“Why wage war when a pretty face can accomplish what needs to be done?”

She scowled at this suggestion. “What if I won’t do it?”

“You love your brother, Daniel, do you not?” A sinister glint appeared in his eyes.

She nodded. Was he threatening Daniel?

“Then you will not wish to see him come to any harm, am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then we are in agreement.” Pargo’s smug smile was replaced with a serious glare. “Mackall is the man who killed your father. You have not forgotten that, have you?”

“No.”

“I will provide you with a weapon. Once you have my treasure, you can have your revenge.”

Lizette would do anything to keep Daniel from harm, but killing Mackall to avenge her father’s murder had never crossed her mind. Could she do it, she wondered? She was kind-hearted to a fault. So much so, she often rescued mice from the jaws of the house cats kept on the property for just that purpose. The thought of Mackall killing her father set her blood boiling. Lizette pictured herself aiming a pistol at the faceless Mackall and pulling the trigger. Perhaps she was angry enough to do it. Her mind turned back to the task at hand.

She would do as she was told, and somehow find this missing treasure. “Is the treasure aboard his ship?”

“I do not believe so. It is likely hidden on this island somewhere. He was working with your father, so you are the perfect one to help me.”

“When I find what you want, will you let Daniel go?” She couldn’t believe her father would have stolen his treasure. He was a good man. He was here to serve the king, not himself.

He shrugged. “I will not need either of you once my treasure is safely back in my quarters.”

That didn’t sound like a guarantee of safety to Lizette, but it didn’t seem she had much choice in the matter. She would find Mackall and then find the treasure.

“I have matters that need my attention. You will stay here in my cabin. I’ve a man stationed outside the door, so do not even think about escaping.”

“What about Daniel?”

“He is with one of my men. You will not see him again until I have my treasure.”

He left her, giving Lizette time to think. She couldn’t believe her papa would ever do anything like this. He was not a thief.



Chapter Three

“AMARO PARGO IS on this island, and he has Lizette and Daniel Wickham,” Rourke announced to Hawes.

“I’ll gather the men and we’ll get them back for ye.”

“No. That would be too dangerous. They might be hurt if violence broke out. We must take care.” He paced back and forth across his quarters. Young Jamie sat cross-legged atop the corner of Rourke’s desk, listening intently.

“Send the men to inquire as to Pargo’s whereabouts. Once we know his location, we can plan to board his ship when the fewest men are there.”

“Do ye believe he’s keeping ’em on *Las Animas*?”

“Possibly, but that is what we must learn.”

“I’ll see to it then.” Hawes was out the door in a hurry.

Rourke tipped his head as he gazed at Jamie, who hadn’t taken his eyes off of him.

“Is there something *I* can do, sir?” Jamie eagerly awaited his orders.

“Ye’ve plenty to do here aboard *The Dagger*.”

The lad appeared disappointed. Rourke understood how he felt. He’d once been in Jamie’s position. Granted, he’d been a few years older, but he’d still needed time to learn the ways of the pirates he served. Jamie would do the same and someday, be grateful to find himself captain of his own ship.

“Get off my desk,” Rourke barked.

Despite the affection he felt for the lad, Jamie was in need of discipline. He’d never laid a hand on him. The lad seemed to understand his place and never did anything to warrant Rourke’s wrath. Hawes and Lynk, on the other hand, had been the recipients of

Jamie's boyish pranks more than once, and Rourke had been forced to step in to save him from a beating on those occasions.

Jamie scurried from the room, and Rourke chuckled to himself before sitting behind his desk, legs propped atop it. He had no idea what Lizette and Daniel even looked like. Governor Wickham had always been very careful to keep them safely away from the docks and the pirates of Manta Cay. This might make it difficult to find them, but then again, how hard could it be to find two children among an island of pirates? He had no doubt he would, and that Pargo would pay for what he'd done.



"IT APPEARS MACKALL'S boat is in the harbor," Pargo announced as he returned to his quarters.

Lizette's stomach roiled as the implications of that announcement became clear to her.

"Do you know how to use a pistol?" he asked.

"My father saw to it that I learned." He'd had the captain of his soldiers spend time teaching her.

"Good. I'll arm you with a pistol and cutlass. You may need them, but if I know Rourke Mackall, he'll be taken by you. This will give you opportunity to get close to him."

Lizette didn't care for the assumption that she would surrender herself to this pirate who'd killed her father. If she was going to find what Pargo wanted, she would do it her way.

"My crew has readied a boat. They will take you to his ship. Remember, your brother's life is in your hands." He held out a hand for her. "Come."

Lizette ignored his offer, instead, placing her hands in the pockets of her dress. She followed him out onto the main deck, where once outfitted with her weapons, she was helped aboard the boat that would ferry her to *The Dagger*. She had never felt so helpless in her life. As doubt about her ability to succeed crept into her head, Lizette thought of Daniel. The sooner she did this, the sooner he would be safe. She had to believe that.

As the men rowed out into the clear blue waters that surrounded Manta Cay, she gazed down into the depths beneath the boat, glimpsing fish, both big and small. She'd never spent time on the water. There was no need for her to ever leave the island, and so, she was both curious and fearful of what she was seeing. As they seemed to have cleared the last ships in port, Lizette became worried. Where were they going? And then a ship, anchored far from the others, came into view. This must be *The Dagger*.

The sight of it heightened the fear she was already feeling, causing her heart to beat so loudly in her ears she thought she might actually faint. She closed her eyes, gulping in air and trying to calm herself in the same way she calmed Daniel when he was afraid. The ship loomed larger as they approached. She repeated in her head the words she so often spoke to her brother. *Don't be afraid. All will be well.*



CAP'N," JAMIE POKED his head into the captain's quarters. "A boat approaches."

"Whose boat?"

Jamie shrugged.

Rourke rose to his feet and followed Jamie to the ship's deck. The lad was right. There was a boat approaching. What he'd failed to tell his captain was that a lass was seated among the men rowing toward them. It pulled up alongside.

"What business have ye?" the deck boss, Elijah Jones, asked.

"I'm here to see your captain," the lass said. She stood in the boat, having a momentary issue with her balance. One of the men reached out to help her, and she slapped his hand away.

Rourke smiled and nodded to Jones.

"You may board," he shouted over the side.

The lass glanced around, seeming unsure of what to do next. Rourke leaned over the side and offered a hand. She was going to have to climb to reach it, and he hoped he wouldn't be going for a swim to save her if she lost her footing. She grabbed hold of the rope ladder and began to climb. He was impressed with her gumption. When close enough, she placed her hand in his, gazing up at him with an icy blue gaze. He guided her the rest of the way up and onto the deck.

"It seems they're not going to wait for ye," Rourke said.

She glanced back over her shoulder, seeming surprised and taken aback as she watched the boat head back toward shore. When she turned back to him, she'd regained her composure, lifting her head and pulling back her shoulders.

"Where is your captain?" she asked.

He nodded to Jamie. "Take her to the captain's quarters."

He watched appreciatively as her hips swung to and fro as she climbed the steps to the quarterdeck and then disappeared through the doorway that would lead down to his quarters. Rourke was puzzled. He'd never met this lass before. He would surely have remembered someone as beautiful as she. What could she possibly want? He turned to find Hawes, mouth agape, staring after her as

well.

"Ye might keep yer eyes in yer head, mate," Rourke said, slapping him on the back.

"Aye, Cap'n. She be a fair piece." He licked his lips.

Rourke pointed his finger at the man. "Mind yer manners, Hawes."

"We'll not disturb ye unless 'tis needed," he said, chuckling to himself.

Rourke took his time on deck. He had to admit his curiosity was getting the better of him with regard to the woman, but if she was here for the reason he suspected, she could wait. He saw to all of the things that needed his attention and then when he was good and ready, he headed to his cabin.

When he opened the door, the lass, who had been going through the papers on his desk, jumped back and placed one dainty hand to her bosom.

"Have ye found what ye're searching for?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

"I'm here for your captain." She moved around to the front of the desk, awaiting his answer. "Well, where is he?"

"Who?" He was purposely being obtuse as he moved closer.

Her feathers were certainly ruffled now. "Your captain." She backed away from him and ended up against his desk.

"I'm the captain," he said, following her and stopping just short of too close.

She seemed to have lost her ability to speak, and he was enjoying her discomfort. Those blue eyes gazed up at him. He could see her confidence waning as he tipped his head and cocked an eyebrow, examining her from head to toe.

"'Twas brave of ye to come here to my boat for a visit with me. I would have been happy to meet with ye at Mistress Anna's brothel, but now that yer here, I'll happily allow ye to join me in my bed. If ye're good, I'll be sure to let the mistress know, and I'll pay her handsomely."

Her breathing quickened as her face flushed with embarrassment.

"How dare you insult me, sir. I am not one of those...one of those..."

He laughed. "One of those lovely lasses who see to a man's most urgent needs?" He was enjoying this. Whoever she was, she was not the kind of woman to be found near the docks of Manta Cay.

She swallowed hard. "You make fun," she muttered, lowering her eyes to the ground.

"I'm sorry. I canna help myself." He lifted her chin with one finger. His gaze traveled from her honey-gold locks to her perfectly plump, pink lips, to the creamy, soft skin of her neck where her pulse jumped,

showing her discomfort. He imagined kissing that neck and those lips, but despite the fact he was a pirate and could take whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, he would never kiss a woman who didn't wish to be kissed. As was the case with most women, he was certain she'd want to be kissed by him and soon. "I have made ye nervous," he observed.

"Not at all," she answered. Her attempt at composure amused him.

"Ye haven't told me yer name or why ye're here." He stared pointedly into her eyes as she glanced away and toward the ceiling.

She cleared her throat before speaking. "I am Lizette Wickham."

It was Rourke's turn to be caught off guard. This was Governor Wickham's daughter. Why had he thought she'd be a young child? She was a fully-grown woman and a beauty at that. He'd succeeded in insulting his friend's daughter. The daughter he'd been asked to take care of. He quickly walked around his desk and sat.

"Did you not hear me?" she asked, regaining her composure.

"I heard ye. Yer father never told me ye were..." What words could he use to describe her that wouldn't make him sound like an idjit? "Well, let's say I assumed ye were a wee lass."

"I see. Is that all you've got to say for yourself?" He heard anger in her voice.

"Was I supposed to say something else?" he asked. From the murderous look on her face, he was sure of it. "My apologies for my behavior. If I'd known, of course, I would have spoken to ye as a gentleman would speak to a lady." That didn't seem to appease her, and he wondered once again why she was glaring at him.



LIZETTE WAS DOING her best to keep the shaking that racked her body under control. The pistol she carried hidden in her pocket gave her courage. This man had murdered her father and no matter how handsome he was, she had a task to complete. Her brother's life depended on it. She hadn't decided yet if she would use that gun to avenge her father's murder or if she even could. She was staring at him, wondering what her next step would be.

"What can I do for ye, Lizette?" he asked.

"You have something I want," she answered.

His lips curled in an amused smile. "Am I to guess what it is?" He casually leaned back in his chair, resting his legs atop the desk.

"I'm here for the treasure," she squeaked out.

His furrowed brow told her she would have to share more information with him. Perhaps he'd stolen so much treasure that he had no idea which one she was speaking about.

The door opened behind her, frightening her into pulling the gun from her pocket and aiming at the entry. A young lad, not much older than Daniel, bounded into the room, but upon seeing the gun, he ducked and ran for his life.

"I'll take that if ye doona mind." Rourke Mackall was at her side, removing the pistol from her hand. "You might hurt someone with that."

The shaking was so pronounced now that she could no longer hide it.

"Ye appear quite shaken. Come, sit." He led her to a settee and sat beside her, holding her hand. "This has been a difficult day for ye. Ye must be in shock. I understand ye are the one who found yer father."

She couldn't speak. She almost shot that lad. She wasn't a killer, not like this man who sat beside her patting her hand and trying to comfort her. Regaining her senses, Lizette pulled her hand away.

"How dare you, sir."

Mackall seemed puzzled.

"How dare you sit there and pretend that you care about me and my father."

"I do care. Several months ago yer father asked me to take care of ye and yer brother should anything happen to him. Now that I look back on it, I believe he was in fear for his life."

"I don't imagine at that time he thought you would be the one killing him," she said through gritted teeth.

Rourke Mackall sprang to his feet. "What! Ye think I am the one responsible for yer father's murder."

"Yes. My father told me so."

"Explain."

"When he lay dying, he was trying to speak, but I couldn't understand most of what he was saying. Then he very clearly said your name. I asked him if you were the one who killed him and he said you were."

"That is simply not true. I just arrived on the island a short while ago. I was planning to meet yer father in town, and I heard from the locals that he'd been shot. I went to the mansion, but it was too late."

"I don't believe you," she said, but the funny thing was that what he was telling her made sense. "Why would he tell me that?"

"Maybe he was trying to tell ye to find me. That I would help ye." His voice was soft, and she wished he would sit beside her again.

Lizette was silent, taking in what he'd just told her. She shifted her gaze to Rourke Mackall's face. He was a ruggedly handsome man. His tall, muscular frame exuded a kind of masculinity that she hadn't seen much of in her years on Manta Cay. Now that it was up to her to care for Daniel, she wished she was more worldly. Her shoulders slumped

as she gazed down at her hands in her lap. Everything weighed heavily on her shoulders.

“Lizette, I would never hurt yer father. He was my friend. Are ye sure he did no’ say anything else?”

“I don’t know. It was such a shock to find him there.”

“We’ll go back to the house. Guyton will vouch for me.” He was kneeling in front of her now, imploring her to believe him.

The sound of rushing feet running toward them caused them both to gaze at the door where Hawes, Lynk, and Jamie all stood armed to the teeth with pistols and swords.

“Hawes! Put your weapons away,” Rourke said, his voice strong and commanding.

“Jamie told us the woman here has a pistol. Almost shot him.” Hawes withdrew his pistol and elbowed Lynk to do the same.

“I’ve got the pistol now and I’m in no danger,” Rourke assured them.

“Pargo’s ship is here in the harbor. Some of his men are ashore. Drink loosened their tongues. Yer lass is aboard with her brother.”

“The lass is here, Hawes.” He turned to Lizette. “Where is Daniel?”

“He’s aboard *Las Animas*.”

“You must tell me everything that happened, from the time ye found yer father.”

Lizette looked up at the group of men standing in the doorway. They were a rough looking lot, but then they were pirates. It was to be expected.

“Leave us, Hawes,” Rourke commanded.

“Aye, Cap’n.”

The group of men turned on their heels, closing the door behind them.

“Tell me about Pargo,” he held her hand in his, gently rubbing it.

She imagined he meant to calm her and it was working.

“He was there after my father was shot.” A slight hiccough was the only indication that she was holding back tears.

“And ye doona believe he may have been the one who shot yer father?” Rourke asked.

“No. He told me we were in danger and must go with him. He seemed concerned about us.”

“Did he send ye here?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Is the treasure ye spoke of earlier his?”

“It is.”

“And he wanted ye to get it from me?”

“Yes.”

He stood, pacing back and forth across the cabin. “Did he want ye

to shoot me as well?"

"No. I wanted to shoot you to avenge my father's death." She was embarrassed to admit it, but it was true.

"I see. I don't have Pargo's treasure. I've been nowhere near his ship in several months. Ye will take me to him. We must save Daniel."

Lizette felt a small sense of safety with this man. Could she trust him? There was no way to know, but if she wanted to save her brother, she would have to. "All right."



Chapter Four

LIZETTE PULLED IN a deep breath as she stood outside the door of Pargo's cabin. One hand was poised on the knob as the other knocked. She glanced around at the men who stood behind her, knowing the plan and hoping it wouldn't result in harm to Daniel.

"Come in," Pargo shouted.

She opened the door and entered.

"You're back." He set aside the papers he had been examining. "What did you find? Do you know where my treasure is?"

"I'm afraid not." Lizette clenched her hands at her sides. She would not let him see her fear.

"Then you should not be here. You've brought me nothing." His eyes narrowed as he slapped his hand on his desktop.

"On the contrary. I've brought you something that will answer the question of where your treasure is not."

"You come to me with riddles?" He stood, leaning his hands on his desk.

Lizette sighed and held her head high. "No. I wouldn't do that."

"What is it then?" he snarled.

"You mean *who* is it," Rourke Mackall said as he entered the room along with Hawes and two of his men.

Pargo, for his part, remained where he was, seemingly unfazed by the fact these men had arrived onboard his ship.

"You are as daring as they say," Pargo noted. "Why are you here and where is my treasure?"

"I am here because I was charged with the care of Lizette and Daniel, and because I do not have your treasure."

"So you say." Pargo stroked his beard into a fine point beneath his chin. "Why should I believe you?"

"I have only just arrived on Manta Cay. It wouldn't be possible for me to have stolen it." Rourke moved to the desk and his men followed.

Lizette watched from the safety of the doorway.

"It would be unwise to kill me. My men have young Daniel. You wouldn't wish any harm to come to him."

"Where is he?" Rourke asked.

"I cannot tell you, but he is in good hands and being cared for lovingly as any child that age should be."

"I want my brother back," Lizette said, moving to stand beside Mackall.

"Then you will need to complete the task I have given you."

"But I have. Rourke Mackall doesn't have your treasure," Lizette protested.

"Then you must continue the search. Perhaps Mackall will help you, because if you fail, you may never see your brother again."

Lizette gasped.

Rourke leaned menacingly across the desk. "Did ye kill the governor?"

"No."

"Ye'd best hope I don't find out differently. I will help Lizette find yer treasure, if it is still here on Manta Cay, and I will find out who killed Governor Wickham. Whoever that man is, will pay dearly."

Pargo nodded before turning back to the papers on his desk, dismissing them without a word.



HAWES AND THE men cleared a path for Rourke, who took Lizette's elbow and guided her through the passageway and out onto the deck where the rest of his men were holding Pargo's men at bay.

"Let 'em go," Hawes shouted as they headed across the deck to their waiting boat. Rourke made his way over the rail and then helped Lizette as they climbed down the rope ladder. The rest of the men joined them and they were on their way without a shot fired.

Once Lizette was settled, Rourke took her hand. "We'll get Daniel. I'll take ye back to the mansion."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"My men will visit the taverns in town. Men are more willing to talk when their tongues have been loosened by a good amount of whisky."

"We should go through Papa's papers."

"I know ye dinna wish to believe yer father was a thief, but we must leave no stone unturned."

“I know, but he kept his business dealings a secret. He didn’t wish to burden me with them.”

It’s not the only secret he’s been keeping, he thought as he gazed at the beauty seated beside him. “Your father was a good man, Lizette, but even good men can be tempted with the thought of great wealth. We’ll see what we can find in his papers.”

He was impressed by her. She’d been through a terrible ordeal, yet she bravely was doing what she must to save her brother when under normal circumstances, she should be grieving for her father.

Hawes and Jamie pulled the skiff up onto the beach. Rourke helped Lizette from the skiff and then held her hand as they trudged through the sand to the road that would take them to the governor’s mansion. Once on more solid ground, she removed her hand from his. He found he’d enjoyed the feel of her soft hand in his, and hoped there would be an occasion when he could hold it again.

“Thank you, I’m fine now.” She straightened her dress, and glancing down at her feet, began walking.

The rutted road wasn’t much better than the sandy beach. Rourke kept his hand at the ready in case he needed to save her from turning an ankle or falling, but she was sure-footed and needed no help from him. Jamie and Hawes kept a respectful distance behind them. Rourke knew that Hawes would be listening for any threats that may approach, taking great care to scan the trees and brush along the roadside for a possible ambush, which Rourke was sure would never come. Hawes liked to believe he was protecting his captain, and Rourke wasn’t about to take that privilege away from him.

As they approached the house, all was quiet. Guyton greeted them at the door.

“Did you do as I asked?” The last thing Rourke wanted was for Lizette to see her father as he was when she’d left the house with Pargo.

“Yes, sir.” Guyton moved to the side to let them pass.

“Miss Lizette, I am so sorry.” A woman, Rourke hadn’t seen when he was there earlier, hurried to Lizette.

“Thank you, Maria.”

“Where is young Daniel?”

“I thought it best to leave him with a...” she hesitated for a brief moment, glancing at Rourke, “friend.”

“He’ll be back in a few days,” Rourke assured her.

“Mr. Mackall and his friends will be staying with us.”

Guyton nodded. “I’ll get the rooms ready for them.”

“Thank you, Maria, would you prepare supper for us?”

“Happily, Miss.”

Lizette stood perfectly still. Rourke could see something was

bothering her.

“What is it?” he asked.

She swiped at her eyes. “We must bury Papa.”

Her pain was evident. He wanted more than anything to comfort her. To pull her into his arms and tell her all would be well. To act on that urge would be a mistake. It would not be what she wanted, so he held back.

“Miss.” The softness in Jamie’s voice was not something Rourke had ever heard before. The lad handed her a kerchief from his pocket.

“Thank you.” She took it and dabbed at her eyes before gathering herself and heading to the back of the house.

Rourke, Hawes, and Jamie followed her out the back door and into the gardens. She walked to a spot where a bench sat beneath a tree.

“Papa loved to sit here in the shade. It was his favorite spot. I’d like to lay him to rest here.”

She stood with her back to them. Head in her hands, her shoulders began to shake, and Rourke knew she was finally releasing the sadness and grief she’d been holding since her father’s murder. His resistance broke and he turned her around, pulling her into his chest and holding her. She didn’t put up a fight, instead, allowing him to whisper softly that he understood and would help her in any way he could. Rourke indicated with his head that Hawes and Jamie should leave them.

He hoped they’d be off to find help digging the grave. Once they were out of sight, he guided her to the bench where they sat. Lizette still held the kerchief Jamie had given her, using it to dry her tears. A gust of wind tousled the curls that framed her face. Rourke had to admit that despite her red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks, she was the fairest lass he’d ever set eyes upon.

“A storm is on the horizon,” Lizette noted. “How long before it arrives?”

“We have time.” Or at least he hoped they did.

Dark clouds off in the distance signaled rain. The only question remaining was if it would be a tropical cyclone or something less destructive. Rourke had almost lost his ship the previous year to just such a storm and it worried him that *The Dagger* might be in harm’s way. He would move it to the leeward cove on the other side of the island as soon as he possibly could, but for now, Lizette and Daniel were foremost in his mind.



LIZETTE FOUND COMFORT in Rourke’s embrace. His strong, sinewy arms and hard chest sent unbidden sensations through her. A mix of emotions overcame her, the strongest of them being guilt. Her father

had only been dead a short while, and yet, her thoughts were for this man she'd only just met.

She placed a hand to his chest, feeling the strong beat of his heart pulsing into her own body. She needed distance. She must regain her composure. There was no time for the way she was feeling. The way her body was rebelling. The way she wanted more of him than just his comfort. Perhaps he sensed her conflict, because he released her and stood. She gazed up into a face that seemed as torn as she felt. His grey eyes were set off by the darkness of his hair that brushed the collar of his black shirt.

Her gaze traveled the length of him, fascinated by what she saw. Lizette didn't think of herself as an inexperienced lass, but in reality, she was. The only men who'd come calling for her were nothing like Rourke. They were all polish and shine and not nearly as interesting. She'd sent them all on their way, never giving a second thought to them once they were gone. She didn't think that would be the case with Rourke. She couldn't stop thinking of him, and he stood right there within arm's length.

"Have you never married, Lizette?" he asked.

"Please, call me Lizzie." She realized she was smiling at him for the first time since they'd met. There was an intimacy in the moments they'd just shared. No awkwardness surrounded them, but still a grieving daughter had other things to concern herself with. "Papa needed me. He encouraged me to marry, but the men who called weren't interested in staying here on Manta Cay, and I couldn't leave."

"You say you couldn't leave, or was it perhaps that you wouldn't leave?"

He seemed to understand her so well. "Wouldn't, yes, that's right. As I said, Papa needed me and so did Daniel. I could never leave them."

"Spoken like a good daughter and sister."

She shrugged this off. At the moment, she felt like neither. "And what of you? Do you have a wife?"

"The life I lead leaves no time for a wife," he answered.

She wondered if there were other women in his life, even though she knew there must be. A handsome man like Rourke would have no trouble finding female companions, which she found didn't sit well with her. "Why did you become a pirate? Was it for the riches?" It occurred to her that she sat beside a real life pirate and she wasn't afraid. On the contrary, she felt quite at ease.

"Not for the riches, although they are a fine boon." He adjusted himself on the bench, placing an arm across the length of the back and behind her. "It was adventure I craved."

"You've found that, I'm sure." She nestled herself further onto the

bench, resting against his arm and enjoying the tingly feeling that ran across her shoulders where she touched him.

His lips curved into a tantalizing smile. "I have. That and more."

What did he mean, she wondered?

Hawes and Jamie returned, each carrying a spade.

"We'll start the digging," Hawes said, wiping his brow on his sleeve.

"Right there, if you don't mind." Lizzie pointed out the spot she'd chosen beneath the tree.

"Aye, Miss." Hawes bobbed his head to her and elbowed Jamie to do the same.

"Thank you. I'll have Maria bring you something to drink. It's terribly hot today."

Rourke rose, and tucking her hand into the crook of his arm, led her back to the house.

"We'll need a coffin."

"Guyton has already arranged for one. It will be delivered in the morning, and Maria will prepare the body for burial. Word has been sent into town for those who wish to pay their respects."

"You've thought of everything."

She had a hard time thinking of him as a pirate. He was such a gentleman in every way. Nothing like the men in the tales she'd heard from her father. She was drawn to him, but knew he wouldn't be staying. He'd sail away as soon as they found Pargo's treasure, and she'd never see him again.



Chapter Five

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, a group of townsfolk gathered along with Rourke, Lizzie, and members of the household staff to lay Governor William Wickham to rest. The minister conducting the services was more likely to be seen staggering to and from Red Legs Tavern than seeing to the spiritual needs of the island inhabitants. As a matter of fact, Rourke wasn't sure he'd ever even been a clergyman. He mumbled a few incoherent words and then hung his head in a silence that lasted far longer than necessary. The man appeared to be asleep on his feet. Rourke nodded to Hawes who unceremoniously kicked the man in the arse.

The minister's head popped up as his mouth fell open. His glazed eyes fluttered wide and he glanced around, seeming unsure of his surroundings. Rourke had enough and shoved the man out of the way.

"Governor William Wickham was a friend and a good man who will be missed. This island will no' be the same without him." He scanned those present and noted many were nodding in agreement. "I'm not saying he was perfect. None of us are." He wasn't comfortable giving this eulogy. "Does anyone else have something they'd like to say?" He waited another moment. "Then we will lay the man in the ground. May God rest his soul."

The men lowered the body into the ground, and then began the work of covering it.

Lizzie looked to him with gratitude. "Please join us inside for refreshments," she said, addressing the others.

Rourke escorted her inside. "I wish things had gone better." He sent a hardened look toward the minister.

"Papa would have thought it amusing," Lizzie said. "He loved all the people of the island, even those like Minister Smith, who would be

frowned upon by the ruling class in London. He often told me that these people,” she motioned with her hand to those now enjoying food and drink, “were his people, no matter their lot in life.”

Rourke smiled. It was true, and one of the reasons he counted William Wickham a friend. “This gives me an idea, Lizzie.”

Her complete attention was on him.

“I’ve something to say to ye.” He spoke loudly in his captain’s voice. “Ye are all aware the governor was murdered. I would like to find the person or persons responsible. If any of ye know anything, or if you hear something, please come to me. No one else need ken we’ve spoken.” He searched the faces of the mourners, not expecting to see much in their expressions. His hope was that by finding the murderer they would also find Pargo’s treasure.

“I wish Daniel had been here,” Lizzie said.

“We will have him back home soon,” he promised. “I will see to it.”

“Pargo is a dangerous man.” She was afraid for Rourke.

“Do not fool yerself, lass. I am, as well.”



HE APPEARED TO think she might run away screaming in fear, but she wouldn’t. She stood her ground. She understood who he was and that others might fear him. Lizzie saw beyond that though. “I understand you are thought to be a bad man. I don’t believe it to be true.”

“I’m a pirate, capable of murderous deeds.”

“Are you trying to convince me?”

“I wish ye to know me for who I am.”

“I do.”

“Good. Now, we’ve work to do.” He left her side, making his way around the room.

Lizzie watched him greet the ladies present. They fawned over him, touching his arm, his chest. Their gazes roving over his body, lingering on his broad chest, flat stomach, and muscular thighs visible in tawny breeches. She was embarrassed that she found herself doing the same. She fanned her face with her hand and hoped no one noticed her heated cheeks.

“Warm?” asked Hawes with a chuckle.

“A little,” she answered, turning her attention to Hawes.

“He’s a good man,” he said, nodding his head toward Rourke. “He’d have me head if he heard me say it.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t say a word.”

“I’m sorry about yer da.”

“Thank you.”

“Cap’n will find the man that did it. Ye can count on it.”

“I’ve no doubt he will.”

Jamie joined them with a mouth full of cake. Lizzie had been overwhelmed with sadness, but the sight of him lightened her mood enough to bring a smile to her face. “Are you enjoying that?”

The lad nodded, unable to speak. He swallowed hard before wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “There be no cake on *The Dagger*.”

Hawes guffawed. “That be true.”

Lizzie found Jamie’s smile contagious. “How long have you been with your captain?” she asked.

“Two years, Miss.” He examined his fingers, and finding some gooeey cake remains, shoved them into his mouth one at a time.

“Is he good to you?” Lizzie’s curiosity about Rourke was getting the better of her. Knowing how he handled his cabin boy would tell her a lot about him.

“Aye. He treats me as his own.”

Lizzie tipped her head. “You mean he’s like a father to you.”

Jamie twisted his face into a comical frown and then turned to Hawes.

“He is lad. Not many would put up with ye the way he does.”

Jamie accepted Hawes words by dipping his head to the side and raising one shoulder in a half shrug. “When will we go back to *The Dagger*?”

“Soon. A storm’s been on the horizon since yesterday. Cap’n will want to moor the boat on the leeward side of the island.”

Lizzie had been so occupied with her father’s death, she hadn’t thought about how devastating a tropical storm could be to the ships in Manta Cay’s harbor. Worry etched her brow.

“Are ye well, lass? Shall I get Cap’n Mackall?”

“Yes, please, Hawes.” What would happen to Daniel when the storm landed? She had no idea where he was. Was he on a boat in the harbor? Was he on land somewhere? Her hands began to shake as a flood of anxiety ran through her body.

Rourke was at her side and guiding her from the room before she realized what was happening. “Hawes tells me ye need me. Ye look ill. Perhaps ye should lie down.”

“I’m worried about the storm and about Daniel.”

“We’ve still got time. Why don’t ye rest? I’ll search your father’s papers. With luck, I’ll find something that will help us locate the treasure.”

Lizzie started up the stairs. “I’ll help you,” she insisted.

“There’s no need. I can handle it on my own.” They stopped outside of her room. Rourke opened the door for her and then turned toward her father’s study.

Lizzie reached out and grabbed his arm. "I'm coming with you."



ROURKE COULD SEE he wasn't going to win this battle. He was trying to protect her, but perhaps it was best for her to see what her father was about.

"As ye wish," he conceded. He opened the study door and was happy to find that Guyton had removed the bloodstained carpet from the floor.

Lizzie entered the room and stopped just inside the door. He watched closely as she scanned the room, her gaze resting on the spot where she'd found her father. "The rug is gone," she noted.

"Are ye sure ye want to do this?" he asked.

"I am." She shifted her focus to Rourke.

A series of emotions played across her face, and as he watched, one by one, they disappeared. The woman standing before him held her head high and marched toward the desk with purpose and confidence. Once again, he was taken with how brave she'd been through this entire ordeal.

Lizzie sat in her father's chair and began by gathering up a pile of papers and handing them to Rourke. She then got to work on a pile of her own. Neither one spoke, instead focusing all of their attention on the task at hand. Rourke knew how important it was to find something that could lead them to the treasure and the murderer. Daniel's life depended on it.

Each ship in the harbor was represented in the form of a manifest documenting the cargo, passengers, and crew. It was clear that in an effort to keep the English crown in the dark, Governor Wickham had doctored the manifests. Ships names had been changed and the cargo they carried was turned into the types of things a merchant ship would carry. He collected a tax from each ship that entered the harbor, but Rourke knew from what he was seeing that William was being less than honest about the totals he gave the crown.

He glanced up to find Lizzie seeing exactly the same in the papers she had gone through and neatly piled in front of her.

"I can't believe it," she muttered. "He was stealing from the crown."

"We all suspected he was holding onto at least part of the harbor tax he collected."

"Do you think he really had something to do with the theft of Pargo's treasure?" she asked. Her eyebrows were knitted together as she stared down at the pile of papers.

"It's possible." Rourke didn't know the answers, but he decided he

wasn't going to try to paint a rosy picture for her. She wouldn't want that.

"But why? Why did he need all this money?" Lizzie gazed up at him, clearly puzzled.

"I don't know." He could only imagine what she must be feeling. She hadn't the least suspicion that her father was anything but a good man, father, and governor. This must be devastating to her. "He must have had a good reason, though and I intend to find out what it was."

He took a quick look around the room. If he was collecting all this money, it must be hidden away somewhere. "Where did your father keep his valuables?" he asked.

"Why?"

Was there a tinge of suspicion in her voice? Why wouldn't there be? By the very virtue of the fact he was a pirate, he would always be suspect. He brushed that thought aside. No matter what she or anyone else might think, he only sought to help her. "He had to be doing something with all the extra money he was receiving. If we know where he kept it, we might find the treasure there with it."

"He never told me anything about his business. He didn't feel it was a woman's place to know these things. It was my job to see to the servants, tend the garden, and look after Daniel."

"Was there anyplace here that he didn't want ye to go? Or want the servants to go?" He tried to put himself in William's shoes. To think what he would have thought.

Lizzie put her finger to her lips as she gazed across the room. "I don't believe so."

"I don't think we're going to find anything else here." He'd already checked under the desk and in all the drawers. It was time to widen their search, but first he must sail his ship around the island to a small leeward cove that would protect both ship and crew during the coming storm. He turned to Lizzie, who stood gazing at him. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Where are you going?" Lizzie asked.

"To *The Dagger*. I must see to the safety of my men and my ship."

"You're leaving, aren't you?" She tipped her head as her eyes searched his face.

"No. I wouldn't do that to ye," he assured her.

"Then take me with you." The determination in her voice made it clear to him she meant what she'd said.

"It's too dangerous. Ye should stay here." Even as the words left his mouth, he knew they wouldn't be enough to deter her.

She shook her head at him and placed her hands on her hips. "My whole life my father kept me here by telling me of the dangers of the world. The dangers of the town and the tavern. Do not do the same."

There was a knock on the door. "Cap'n, it's me, Hawes."

"Come in," Rourke said.

The door opened. He nodded to Lizzie before turning to Rourke. "We'll need to return to the ship."

"Aye. Go. I'll catch up with ye." Rourke turned to Lizzie. "I will not leave ye. I promise ye I'll be back, but if ye insist on returning to *The Dagger* with me, I will no' stop ye."

She hurried to his side, a glint of excitement in her eyes. "We should go, then."

He hoped he wouldn't regret giving in to her.



NOTHING WOULD STOP her. Lizzie was determined to live her life the way she'd only dreamed of in the past. Her father had protected her from everything, even from the dark side of his business dealings. There was no need for her to continue to live by his rules. He was gone and could no longer stop her.

"Guyton, I'm going to Captain Mackall's ship. See to it that the house is secure for the approaching storm."

"Yes, Miss, as you wish." If Guyton thought it at all strange that she was on her way to a pirate ship, it didn't show on his face.

She followed Rourke through the doors and down the steps. He grabbed her hand, sending a thrill through her that reached deep down to a place she'd only vaguely been aware of until this very moment. The man had her feeling and thinking things no proper lady would ever consider.

"We must hurry." He gave her hand a squeeze of encouragement.

"What about Daniel?" she asked.

"Pargo is no fool. He'll keep him safe."

That wasn't the answer she was hoping to hear.

They were running directly into the wind. Hawes and Jamie were visible in the distance in front of them. Palm trees blew back and forth and fronds were lifted into the air and blown into their path. Rourke guided her safely around the windblown hazards they came across without missing a step.

As they approached the harbor and the waiting skiff, the sky was filled with dark clouds. The sun would be completely gone in a matter of minutes. Rourke stopped. "He's gone."

"Who?" Lizzie asked.

"Pargo. His ship is gone."

Panic gripped her. "Daniel!"

He took her hand again and ran for the skiff, lifting her and setting her down inside. "Sit," he ordered.

Hawes and Rourke shoved the boat out into the water before jumping aboard. The water was choppy, unlike her first trip to *The Dagger* only two short days ago. It had been smooth as glass then. Now, the boat rocked up and down with each wave it met. Rourke, Hawes, and Jamie paddled furiously with the oars. The sky was so dark Lizzie strained to see where they were headed. How would they ever find the ship if they couldn't see it?

Her fears were soon allayed as she saw several small dots of light ahead. "Is that *The Dagger*?" she asked.

"Aye." She looked in the direction of Rourke's voice, barely making him out in the dark, despite the fact he wasn't more than a foot away from her, but the sureness he emitted put her at ease. She felt safe with him when perhaps she shouldn't.

They approached the side of the ship. Jamie scrambled up the rope ladder to the deck. He disappeared from sight and was back in a moment shining a lantern down so they could see.

"Ye first, lass." Rourke helped her stand and then guided her to the ladder.

She clutched at the ropes as she slowly made her way up. Rourke's hand was on her backside, then her leg and foot. Oddly, the familiarity of his hands in places no man should be touching calmed her enough to make it to the top, where Jamie helped her over the side and onto the deck. She gasped for air, realizing she'd been holding her breath the whole way.

Rourke and Hawes hopped aboard. "Go to my cabin and stay there," he said to Lizzie.

She balked at his tone, but did as he said. Jamie led the way to the quarterdeck and the door that led to the captain's quarters. He entered first with the lantern, then made his way around the cabin, lighting candles here and there until the chamber was bright, and Lizzie felt a bit more at ease. "I'll leave ye, Miss. The cap'n will need me on deck."

She looked for a comfortable spot to rest. She was bone tired. This had been a long and taxing day for Lizzie. She ran her hand across his desk, taking in the map set atop it along with a few books. She'd been here before, but so set on finding something that might lead to the treasure, she hadn't paid much attention to the furnishings. She stopped for a moment to listen to orders being shouted on the main deck as men answered and moved quickly to carry them out. The boat lurched forward. They were under sail and heading for safety. She knew little about ships, which was surprising considering she'd lived her whole life on an island. Even still, she knew that Rourke was doing exactly what he must to save his ship from disaster.

As she walked around the chamber, she came to a bed. A rough, wool blanket was neatly laid out across it. She sat on the edge as

fatigue overtook her. She could lie down for a short while. Rourke wouldn't mind.

She removed her shoes and lay down. The thought of Rourke sleeping here in this very bed made her smile. Closing her eyes, Lizzie wondered what it would be like to have him here beside her. She imagined his strong arms wrapped around her, holding her close. Perhaps a kiss would be shared and then another. A certain euphoria overcame her as her mind wandered further and further into a dream she wished to be real.



Chapter Six

The Dagger SLICED through the choppy seas to come alongside *Las Animas*. As Rourke suspected, Pargo had sailed his ship to safety in the cove. Several other ships had done the same. Those left in the harbor of Manta Cay risked destruction, and those who sought the open sea must hope to outrun the storm or find themselves at its bottom.

Rourke shouted to the crew of *Las Animas*. "I'll speak with yer captain."

Pargo's crew stared with obvious disdain at him and the men backing him on deck. No one moved.

"*Traeme tú capitán,*" he shouted in Spanish.

One of the men nodded and scurried away. A while later, he returned, followed by Pargo.

"Sí," he said. "What is it you want? Have you found my treasure?" It was obvious he was irritated at having to come on deck to speak with Rourke.

"No. We're still looking. Where is Daniel?" Rourke asked.

"He is safe." His tone was short.

"On yer ship, or on land?"

Pargo cocked an eyebrow, his eyes narrowed. "Why do you ask me such a question? You know I will not tell you."

"His sister is worried about him." All he could do was hope to glean some information from this exchange, perhaps mentioning Lizzie's concern would get him some answers.

"Tell her he is in the safest place he could possibly be. I told her I would take care of him, and I am a man of my word."

Rourke acknowledged him with a scowl and then ordered his men to drop anchor a good distance from any of the other boats. He left Hawes in charge and went to reassure Lizzie that Daniel was safe.

He didn't see her when he first entered his quarters and was worried she might have wandered off to explore the ship without his knowledge. He poked his head out the door and saw Jamie walking toward him. "Where is she?"

Jamie put his finger to his lips and walked into the cabin. He pointed to Rourke's bed. Jamie awaited his next orders, but Rourke pointed to the door and he silently crept from the room.

Rourke hadn't anticipated he'd find Lizzie asleep. He crept softly to the bed where he gazed down at her lovely face, completely at ease for the first time since he'd met her. He hoped it was because she felt secure with him and knew he would let no harm come to her or Daniel. His next thoughts were not so chaste, for which he silently berated himself. This was the daughter of the friend he had only this morning laid to rest. He was asked to aid her upon her father's death, not bed her. There were plenty of women on the island who would be more than eager to fulfill his needs, but none of them were Lizzie.

A riot of blonde curls lie scattered across his pillow. He reached down and twirled one gently around his fingers. Her hair was as soft as silk, just as he'd imagined it would be. Her chest rose and fell with each breath, drawing his attention down the length of her body, which he appreciatively drank in. What would she think if he were to lie with her, hold her, feel the length of her body against his? Would she welcome him or would she be angry? As he watched, she shivered and pulled her arms and legs close as if to ward off a chill. Rourke retrieved a blanket and gently laid it over her. He mentally shook himself out of the crazy thoughts he was having. Lizzie deserved so much better than what he had to offer.

He sat at his desk, doing his best to keep his mind off of the lovely woman who occupied his bed. The wind had begun to howl, vying with the pelting rain to see which could be the loudest. Rourke wasn't surprised when it woke Lizzie.

"Rourke?" She sat up in the bed, glancing around the room until she saw him.

"Are ye well?" he asked.

"The rain..." She hugged herself.

"Ye're cold," he said, rising to go to her.

"And a little afraid."

He sat on the edge of the bed, taking her into his arms as if it was the most natural thing to do. He tucked her head under his chin. "Doona fear. Ye're safe here."

"Daniel?"

"Pargo is moored here in the cove as well. He says Daniel is safe, and I believe him." He felt her body relax in his arms and knew she trusted him. It was an honor he didn't feel he deserved. "Go back to

sleep. I've some work to do."

"Where will you sleep?" she asked.

"With the men below deck." He looked down at his feet and then glanced toward the door.

"But this is your bed," she protested. The candlelight did nothing to hide her beauty, in fact, it enhanced it.

"Not tonight." *Why not tonight?* he wondered.

"I would feel better if you stayed here." The pleading in her voice touched his heart. How could he leave her?

"All right. I'll make my bed on the floor." He looked around for the perfect spot, but she interrupted his search, and his head popped up as she spoke.

"You can rest next to me. I don't mind."

He was kicking himself for choosing this moment to be a gentleman, but now was as good a time as any. "That wouldn't be right."

"It would be." She pulled the blanket aside and moved over to make room for him."

"Lizzie, I..."

"I don't want to be alone."

How could he refuse her? It would require a good deal of restraint on his part. She was staring at him with eyes as blue as the Caribbean Sea, her rose-colored lips parted and waiting, but for what? He'd never felt less sure of himself with any woman. He knew she was different. She was a lifetime, not a single night, for any man who dared to make her his own. Still, he did as she requested. She covered them both with the blanket and then snuggled up beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. For his part, Rourke didn't dare move for fear it might trigger an urgent fire that only Lizzie could quench.

"Thank you," she whispered. The sound of her voice nearly breaking his resolve.

He was quite sure he would have gotten a better night's sleep out in the pouring rain than here in this cramped bed with Lizzie by his side. He could feel every soft curve of her on his arm, hip, and leg. His erection was proof of it. Rourke was regretting his decision to accede to her wishes, but he'd been doing that since he first set eyes on her. He'd given in every time she told him she was going to do something he didn't want her to do. Why? He'd never had a problem saying no to anyone before. What was wrong with him?

The sooner he found the treasure, rescued Daniel, and got her back to London, the better. Then he could go back to being the dangerous man he was reputed to be.



LIZZIE WAS ENJOYING the warmth of Rourke's body next to hers even though she knew it had been wrong to invite him to sleep with her. She'd never been in the same bed with a man before. When she'd dreamed of the man she would spend the rest of her life with, he'd been a lot like Rourke Mackall. He'd been handsome, tall, and strong, but he hadn't been a pirate. She found that part didn't bother her at all. In fact, it excited her.

She tentatively placed one hand on his chest. She could feel his heart thudding as his body tensed. Had she done that to him? She giggled.

"Why do ye laugh?" he asked. The huskiness of his voice burrowed down into her soul.

"I believe I'm making a big, strong man like you a bit nervous," she said, feeling comfortable enough to tease him.

He chuckled. "Ye do, lass."

She rose up on her elbow and gazed at him, only barely visible by the remaining candlelight of the room. "Why?"

"Because ye are a beautiful woman and I am a man."

"Oh." She'd never thought of herself as beautiful. "Do you really think I'm beautiful?"

"Aye." A certain softness lit his eyes as he gazed on her. "Yer an innocent, Lizzie Wickham."

"What do you mean?" No one had ever called her that before.

"Ye doona ken the way it is between a man and a woman."

"No. I don't," she admitted. "I've never even been kissed."

"'Tis a shame. Yer lips are ripe for the picking."

"Would you kiss me?" she asked. Her question was greeted with silence. She had been wrong to ask such a thing. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

"Doona be sorry." He lifted her chin and ever so gently kissed her lips.

Lizzie thought surely she'd died and gone to heaven. She didn't dare move, hoping he might do it again. And he did. This time, he took her face in his hands and kissed her more deeply. She was unsure of herself, but she followed his lead, which doubled her pleasure. She snuck her hand into the opening of his shirt, relishing the feel of hard muscle and soft skin. Rourke crushed her to him, rolling partially atop her, pinning her with one heavy thigh. Something hard and long poked her hip.

"What is that?" she asked, reaching to touch it, but he grabbed hold of her hand, stopping her.

"'Tis my desire for ye, lass. It's best ye doona awaken it further." He set her aside and rolled away from her, leaving her to stare at his back.

"I desire you as well," she said, feeling emboldened by his statement.

"No. Ye doona." He gruffly stated. "And if ye're a smart lass, ye'll no' tempt me further."

She was baffled by his behavior. She'd just shared passionate kisses with the man, and now he was acting as if she'd done something wrong. But what? This was all new to her. No one had ever told her what to expect or how to behave when in bed with a man. That was a conversation her father would never have broached, and she had no mother or sisters to ask. She only knew that it was a wanton woman who would give herself to a man without the sanctity of marriage. That must be it. He thought her a wanton woman!

Embarrassed by her behavior, she turned away, facing the wall. Lizzie hoped sleep would come quickly to put her out of her misery.



MORNING HADN'T COME soon enough for Rourke. He sprang from the bed and out onto the quarter deck not looking back to see if he'd woken Lizzie. What had come over him last night? He was a fool to have given in to her. He knew it then and he knew it now. Once he'd tasted her sweet lips, it was all he could do to stop himself from taking her right there in his bed without virtue of the vows he knew she deserved.

"Jamie!" He growled. "Bring Miss Wickham something to break her fast."

"Aye, Cap'n!" He ran for the galley.

The wind was still whipping the deck and the rain hadn't let up even a small bit. It was anyone's guess how long this would go on. Looking toward the horizon, all he could see were dark clouds lined up as far as the eye could see.

"Hawes!"

"Aye, Cap'n?"

"Get the boat ready to go ashore. Miss Wickham and I will return to the mansion. I'm leaving you in charge here."

Jamie ran past him on his way back to the captain's quarters. He carried a tray covered by a large cloth to keep the rain off. Rourke stalked across the deck to the galley where he would take his meal. There he could be among the men where he might be able to break the hold Lizzie Wickham seemed to now have on him.

Reading the scowl on his face, the men in the galley jumped to their feet when he entered, clearing a place for him to sit. Cook placed a plate of food in front of him with a surprising amount of fresh ingredients. He sent a questioning look to the man.

In answer to the unasked question, the man said, "I was able to go ashore with some of the men before the storm hit."

Rourke tucked in, filling his belly with eggs, meat, and some fresh fruit.

"Cap'n, the skiff is ready."

"Get Miss Wickham. I'll be waiting." Rourke grabbed an apple and strode out to the main deck. He assessed the men and the general condition of the ship. He was satisfied they'd made it through so far with no damage and hoped it would stay that way.

"I think we've seen the worst of it," Lynk said as he joined him on deck.

"I hope so. When it's passed, we'll need to finish replenishing our stores."

"I'll see to it."

Rourke was feeling better now that he'd had time to himself, but then Lizzie Wickham walked out onto the deck sending him back to his bed with her warm and willing body pressed against him. She'd be the death of him yet, he thought, steeling himself for the day.

"Good morn to ye, Miss Wickham," he said, trying to sound as cheerful as possible.

She merely nodded, not even giving him a smile, and headed for the ship's rail.

He climbed over onto the rope ladder and reached a hand up to help her. Hawes was doing the same from the deck. She refused to give Rourke her hand as she stepped onto the top rung of the ladder. The driving wind and rain added to their difficulty by making the ladder slick and treacherous. A gust of wind shifted it to the side, causing Lizzie to lose her balance. Her feet slipped from the rung, and she was left hanging by one hand. A small shriek left her lips, and Rourke's heart jumped in his chest. Scrambling up the ladder, he reached out and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her in. She let go of the ladder completely, wrapping her arms around his neck, and throwing him off balance.

"Stay still or we'll both end up in the water," he cautioned her. "Now, wrap your legs around me and hold tight." Once she'd done as he'd ordered, Rourke climbed the rest of the way down to the skiff, where one of his men peeled her off of him and seated her out of harm's way. He cocked an eyebrow, lifting one side of his lips in a half smile. "When help is offered, it's best to take it." His reprimand was met with silence.

One of the men gave Lizzie a blanket, which she pulled up over her head to block the rain, and Rourke assumed to avoid his gaze.

The small boat was buffeted by wind, waves, and rain as they made the journey onto the cove's sheltered beach.

“Take the boat back to *The Dagger*,” he ordered his men. “I’ll signal when we’re ready to go back.” He hopped from the boat to help pull it up onto the sand so Lizzie wouldn’t end up any soggier than she already was.

Her dress was heavy with water and was now picking up sand as they made their way up the beach and through the scrub grass that lead to woodland. Somewhat sheltered from the rain, Rourke took a moment to stop and allow Lizzie to catch her breath.

“Are ye angry with me?” he asked.

“No. Of course not. Why would you think that?” she asked, wiping wet locks of hair from her face.

“Because ye haven’t uttered a single word to me until this verra moment.” He should be satisfied with her silence, but he couldn’t help himself and wished to hear her voice.

She gave a slight shrug.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he offered. “I shouldn’t have kissed ye. It was wrong of me.” He’d never had to apologize to a woman for kissing her, but with Lizzie Wickham, it seemed his life was now full of firsts.

“You regret it then.” The bitterness she was feeling was evident in her voice.

“Yes.”

She cocked an eyebrow and glared angrily at him. That was the wrong answer.

“I...” He stumbled and stuttered over his words. This wee lass was proving to be tougher on him than any adversary he’d ever faced. “No. I doona regret it. I would do it again, but I doona wish to compromise yer chances of making a real match once I’ve returned ye to London as yer father requested.”

“London! Why would I want to go there?” She seemed quite taken aback by his statement.

“Yer father told me ye had family there. It was his wish ye be with them.”

“My father is no longer here to decide what I should or shouldn’t do. I do not wish to go to London. Why would I? I’ve never even been there. I don’t know those people who are supposed to be family. I’ve spent my whole life on Manta Cay. It is my home.”

Rourke was surprised by her insistence. He hadn’t expected she would object in the least. “Ye will no’ have much choice, lass. The crown will send a replacement governor to the island, and they will reside in the mansion.”

“No. I won’t go. I’ll find a way to stay here with Daniel.” She turned and began pushing her way through the greenery that surrounded them.

“Where are ye going?” he asked.

“Home,” she shouted back over her shoulder.

“Ye ken how to get there?”

“I’ve been to this beach many times, sir. I can find my way home without your help.”

“Lizzie, wait!” He quickly caught up with her, and grabbing her arm, turned her to face him. She swung at him, meaning to slap his face, but he was faster. He held her hand and leaned close. She was even more beautiful as she stood before him with flared nostrils, pursed lips, and fire in her eyes.

He couldn’t help himself. He wanted her. More than he’d wanted any woman. His lips were on hers before she had a chance to duck away. Despite her initial reluctance, he felt her arms wrap around his neck as she pressed herself against him. His lips left hers and traveled to her jaw, her ear, and rained kisses down her neck.

His mouth followed the rivulets of water as they trailed down between her breasts. As he kissed her, they stumbled back until Lizzie rested against a whitewood tree. The canopy overhead provided some shelter from the rain, but neither of them seemed to care. His hand lifted her dress, then sought the softness of her womanhood. He wouldn’t take her. It was his greatest wish, but Rourke knew it was best for her future that her maidenhead be left intact.



LIZZIE JUMPED, BUT not in fear. Mesmerized by his kisses, she was giving herself to him without reservation. His work-roughened hands were gentle in their ministrations. The pleasure of that first contact had taken her by surprise, causing her to startle. A small shriek escaped her lips.

“Am I hurting ye, lass?” The huskiness in his voice sent shivers of passion over her.

She shook her head, unable to speak.

“Good. Yer pleasure is what I seek. Ye’ve a treasure, but only for yer husband. I’m jealous of the man, and he does not yet exist.”

She wanted to tell him to take the treasure he sought. The nameless, faceless man he concerned himself with was not the one she wanted. His fingers were still working beneath her dress while the other hand undid the ties of her bodice, releasing her breasts, which he laved with his mouth and tongue. As her pleasure increased, he watched her face, never looking away. Lizzie’s breathing quickened, and as her excitement increased, ecstasy overtook her. Rourke smiled as if he’d accomplished something wonderful, then plundered her mouth until she was left speechless. She crumpled into his arms as he

kissed the back of her neck.

Lizzie had been greatly inexperienced in the ways of love yesterday, but today among the rain-soaked trees, she'd gained something she would never forget.



Chapter Seven

THEY REACHED THE steps to the governor's mansion soaked to the bone.

"Guyton," Lizzie called once they were through the door.

"Miss Lizette! You're back," he replied from the back of the house.

They waited a moment, and the servant appeared at the doorway. Taking one look at them, he shouted for Maria, who came running. She raised her eyebrows, tipping her head to the side. "Where have you two been?"

"Walking from the cove," Lizzie answered with a beaming smile.

"The rain has made you happy?" The skepticism in her voice was unmistakable.

"Yes. Today it has." She glanced from Guyton to Maria and back again. "Will you see to a warm bath for both of us, please?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Guyton, see if you can find something suitable for Captain Mackall to wear while his clothes dry."

He nodded and exchanged a quizzical look with Maria as they left to attend to their tasks.

Once they were out of sight, she flew into Rourke's arms. "You say I must save myself for the man I will marry, but I tell you, there is no one here on this island I wish to be wed with."

"You will find a suitable husband in London," he answered. She tried to read him, but was unable.

"I've told you, I'm not going to London. I will stay here." She'd always had a stubborn streak, and had been quite good at getting her way with her father when she truly wanted.

"How? Ye cannot stay here in this house." He threw his hands in the air, his exasperation with her obvious. "There will be a new

governor and *he* will live here.”

She looked at the ceiling, placing a finger to her lips as she thought. “Perhaps I will send word to the crown of my father’s death and request I be made governor.”

Rourke laughed. “They will never permit it.”

“How do you know? I am very capable of running this island.”
How hard could it be?

“I’m sure ye could, but it would be unlikely for them to allow a woman to wield such power,” Rourke patiently explained.

“England has been ruled by women in the past.” She was certain he must know this.

“Ye are not a queen.”

“Damn your logic.” She crossed her arms and glared at him.

“So, ye see it is important that ye go to London and find a husband.”

“No. It is not what I want.” Why wouldn’t he stop saying that?

“What do ye want?” he asked.

“I want to be with you.” It was the truth. She hadn’t known him for more than a few days, but she knew he was the man for her.

“That can never be. Ye forget I am a pirate, and as such, I live most of my life on the sea.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Lizzie, please, understand me. I am not the man for ye. I’m...”

“I know. Do not say it again. You are a pirate. A dangerous man. But you are also a man with a kind heart and gentle hands.”

“I made a mistake out there in the woodland. I was filled with lust for ye. I should never have allowed myself to be so bold.” He scrubbed his hands through his hair as he spoke.

“It was not a mistake. Don’t you dare say it was.” Anger was building in her. Anger that he wouldn’t admit he wanted her as much as she wanted him. Anger that he insisted on taking her to London against her will. And anger that there was little she could do about it.

“We’ll not speak of it again. I made a promise to yer father and I intend to keep it.” He bounded up the stairs to her father’s rooms, leaving her alone and feeling very unsettled.



“THANK YOU, GUYTON,” Lizzie said as he placed a plate of food in front of her.

Rourke waited for her to be served before taking the first bite of his meal. There was something about sitting here alone in the dining room with Lizzie that made him wish for just a moment that he was someone else. That he was a man worthy of Lizette Wickham. He

lifted his glass of wine and drank.

Memories of his life at Dunnet Head came unbidden. He'd been but a young lad, expected to be present for the family's evening meals. He'd rebelled against it and eventually gotten what he wanted: freedom to do as he pleased and with whom he pleased. He missed them, especially his mother. He hadn't seen her in years, and he wasn't sure if he went home, he'd be welcome after so much time had passed. Perhaps when next he visited Scarba Island he would make the time to sail *The Dagger* to his old home. If they sent him away, so be it. At least he would have tried.

"You are deep in thought," Lizzie noted.

"Aye." He dragged himself back to the present and to the pretty woman who made thoughts of a life filled with moments like this possible.

"Are you going to tell me what you're thinking about?" She tilted her head, waiting for a reply.

"Home," he said, pausing to drink the fine wine they'd been served. "Dunnet Head."

"Is that where you're from?" she asked, her obvious curiosity showing.

"It is, but I haven't been back in many, many years." It was something he tried not to think about, and that he certainly hadn't spoken of for many years.

"Why did you leave? Did you not love them?" she asked.

"I did, but at the time, I loved my freedom more." He'd found independence for a brief time, but it soon turned into responsibilities that greatly curtailed that freedom.

"They must miss you."

"I don't know. It's been so long. I'm certain I no longer exist to them." The thought they'd forget him was a sobering one.

"*The Dagger* is your home, then."

"When I'm at sea, aye." A small smile appeared. He much preferred talk of the sea to talk of Dunnet Head.

"And when you're not?" Lizzie asked.

"Scarba Island. Home of my Scottish brethren." He wasn't used to spending so much time talking about himself. It made him a bit uncomfortable.

"They are your family now." It seemed she understood him perfectly.

"Aye." He put his fork down and wiped his mouth with the linen napkin Guyton had placed in his lap at the start of their meal.

"How is it that you came to be there?" Her curiosity seemingly had no end.

"I sought work aboard a ship when I was a lad." He leaned back in

his chair as he spoke. "It turned out to be a pirate ship."

"Weren't you afraid?" She leaned forward. Her eyes showed her eagerness to hear his answer.

"Nay. To the contrary. I was excited. I was hoping for adventure and I'd found it." He was more in his element speaking of the sea and the joy it brought him.

"My brother is on a pirate ship. Do you think he is having an adventure?" Lizzie's curiosity was quickly replaced by a fear for Daniel that was apparent on her face.

Rourke sought to allay those fears. "It is surely an adventure for him."

Her shoulders relaxed as she spoke. "He's been as sheltered by our father as I."

"Ye wish it had been different."

"I don't know. He was protecting us, and now that I have a clearer picture of Manta Cay, I understand why."

Guyton entered the room and began clearing the plates from their first course. Once his arms were full, he left them again.

"It was best he kept ye far from the docks and taverns. It is no place for a lady," Rourke said.

"And yet, there are ladies who live and work there," Lizzie observed.

"Women, aye. Ladies, nay."

She bristled at this, and he took note.

"Their social position does not allow for them to be called ladies," he explained.

"By virtue of the fact that I was born the governor's daughter, I am deemed a lady, and yet, I do not feel they deserve any less respect than I."

"I stand corrected. Forgive my ignorance. Ye are a *special* woman, Lizzie. Ye would make a suitable governor for this island."

"Do you truly believe so?" she asked, obviously pleased at his response.

"It is not within my power to grant ye such a position, but if it were, there is no question I would select ye."

A warm smile appeared on her rosebud lips, and it did his heart good. He would do anything to see that smile. To make her happy would be his greatest joy.

Guyton appeared with a pitcher to pour them more wine.

"Tell Maria everything is delicious," Lizzie said.

"Yes, verra good," Rourke added.

"You can leave the wine," Lizzie said.

"Yes, Miss." He placed it on the table and left them, returning moments later with platters of food which he set on the table. He

served each of them and then was gone.

They ate the rest of their meal with little conversation, and when they had finished, they adjourned to the sitting room where Lizzie settled herself on the settee. The furnishings were of the highest quality. Governor Wickham had spared nothing to make his home a palace. There were chairs covered in brocaded fabric patterned with birds, trees, and flowers, much like Manta Cay. Tables around the room held books and small porcelain treasures, likely booty from the many pirate ships that visited the port.

Thunder rumbled and lightning lit up the night.

"It doesn't frighten you?" Rourke asked.

"No." She actually appeared to be enjoying it. "It's exciting. There is precious little of that to go around here in my world."

It never occurred to him that a woman like Lizzie might be bored with her life. He thought about his own life and how he'd craved adventure as a young lad. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to be trapped in this house and on these grounds with no outlet for even a bit of excitement. He was sure he'd go mad and wondered how she had maintained her sanity?

"Now that yer father is gone, ye will have more freedom, but ye must be careful, Lizzie. The world is filled with people who will take advantage of ye." He stood and made his way across the room to a box that caught his attention. It wasn't a large box. In fact, it fit in the palm of his hand. It was intricately carved with monstrous creatures. "May I?" he asked, indicating the box.

"Yes."

He opened the lid, finding that the box was lined with velvet, and tucked neatly into the bottom was a key. He lifted it out and held it up to Lizzie. "What does this open?" he wondered.

She stood and went to him. She took the key from his hand, examining it. "I've never seen this before." She placed it back in the box.

He stared at the key a while longer before closing the lid and placing it back on the table. "There must be a place here in the house where your father kept his valuables."

Lizzie thought for a moment. "He never told me of any such place."

"It's too dark to hunt for anything tonight. Tomorrow morning we'll search the house and the grounds. Hopefully the storm will have passed by then." He retrieved the box and put it in his pocket for safekeeping.

"We have a busy day ahead of us. We should retire for the night." She stood close, gazing up at him.

The aroma of verbena wafted to his nose. It was a scent he would

forever associate with Lizzie. It took every ounce of control he could muster not to take her in his arms and kiss her again and then carry her to his bed where he would make her his. She would be willing, of that he was sure, but he would not take advantage of her feelings for him. "I will escort ye to yer bedchamber."

She placed her hand in the crook of his arm as he led her up the stairs. The heat of that dainty hand was burning a hole in his arm and his resolve. A few more steps and they would be at her door.

As they approached, she removed her hand and turned to him. "Goodnight, Rourke."

Before he could speak, she stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek, then slipped through the door, leaving him to what would surely be a sleepless night filled with thoughts of her.



Chapter Eight

THE SEARCH BEGAN first thing in the morning. Rourke and Lizzie went from room to room in an effort to find the place where her father would have kept his valuables, including the extra taxes he'd been collecting for years. They found nothing.

Lizzie was ever aware of the handsome man at her side. A stray lock of dark brown hair fell into Rourke's eyes, and much to her disappointment, before she could do it for him, he raked it back off of his face.

"Do you think Guyton knows anything?" he asked. "Or Maria?"

"Perhaps we should find them."

"We've looked everywhere. If it's not in the house, I'm not sure how to proceed. We don't even know if William was the one who took the treasure. If he was, he would have needed an accomplice. I can't imagine him sneaking aboard *Las Animas* on his own."

"My thoughts exactly," Lizzie concurred.

They went to the kitchen where they found Maria busy cleaning. She glanced up at them and stopped what she was doing. "Is there something I can do for you, Miss?"

"Maria, do you know if my father had a hiding place somewhere in the house or on the grounds?" Lizzie asked.

The woman looked puzzled, but was obviously thinking about it. "No. He would not have told me if he did, and I've never heard any of the servants speak of it."

"Do ye ken where Guyton is?" Rourke asked.

"In the garden." She neatly folded the cloth in her hands and placed it on the table.

"Thank you for your help," Lizzie said before following Rourke out the back entrance into the herb garden.

Small droplets of water sitting on leaves caused the plants to sparkle as if they'd been dusted with tiny gemstones. The storm passed at some point during the night, leaving blue skies and white clouds.

"Guyton!" Lizzie called. He was examining a broken tree limb caused by the high winds.

"Miss," he said, turning toward them. "We were lucky. This seems to be the only damage to the garden."

"That is fortunate," Lizzie said. "We were wondering if my father ever told you of a place he might hide things of importance."

He thought for a moment. "Not that I can remember."

"Guyton, on the day of the murder, were there any guests you can recall?"

"Only Mr. Pargo and the other one."

"They came after the murder," Lizzie reminded him.

"Are ye sure?" Rourke asked her.

"I didn't see anyone here before I found Papa, but I had been out for a walk shortly before."

"What about you, Guyton?" Rourke asked.

"I was in the garden."

"And Maria?"

Guyton shrugged.

"Were any of the other servants here? Or any of William's soldiers?" Rourke turned first to Guyton and then to Lizzie with his question.

"You know, now that I think about it, I was surprised to come back and find no one around. It was very quiet, except for the sound of the gunshot," Lizzie answered.

"Where was Daniel?" Rourke asked.

"He was with Guyton." Lizzie's brow furrowed as she placed a finger to her lips. "Do you really believe Pargo and Agustin were responsible for my father's death?"

"I do. They could easily have been hiding somewhere after he was shot."

"I did call for Guyton when I first entered the house, but before I heard the shot. Perhaps they heard me."

"Pargo will have a lot to answer for." Rourke seemed quite agitated.

"Mr. Rourke, the other man..." Guyton began, but it was obvious he didn't know his name.

"Agustin," Rourke said.

"Yes." Guyton appeared thoughtful. "He has been here before to see the governor."

"Are you sure?" Lizzie asked.

"I am. Your father never had visitors here at the mansion, so I

thought it unusual.”

“How many times did you see him?” Rourke asked.

“Two or three. He never stayed long.”

“Thank you, Guyton. We may have solved at least one mystery, possibly two.”

They turned back to the house, leaving Guyton to continue his gardening.



“WHAT SHOULD WE do now?” Lizzie asked.

“I think I should pay a visit to the tavern. Someone there might be convinced to supply the information we need.”

“I’m coming with you,” Lizzie stated.

“I’ve come to accept the fact that every time I say I’m going to do something on my own ye want to go with me. This time, I’m putting my foot down. No. You can no’ come with me.”

“I’d like to know why.” She stopped, hands on hips, awaiting his answer.

“Have ye ever been to the docks before these past few days?” He knew the answer to his question, but thought it worth repeating.

“No.”

“Then ye don’t understand the danger it poses for ye.” She was an obstinate lass. He wasn’t sure the threat of danger would deter her, but it was all he had to frighten her with.

“Just for me? What about you? Are you not in danger as well?”

“No. I am armed and capable of taking care of myself.” He could see her impatience and anger beginning to bubble over.

“Well, I don’t care what you think. I’m coming with you or I will go on my own.” She stormed past him, toward the doors, but he reached out, grabbing her arm and spinning her to face him.

He had no doubt that she’d go on her own given the chance. He could stand here and argue with her until at some point she finally gave in, but they didn’t have the luxury of time. “Fine. Come with me, but ye must do as I say, do ye understand?”

“Do you think I lack intelligence. Of course I understand.” He had clearly angered her once again.

The fire in her eyes fanned his own flames. Flames of desire. Lord how he’d love to kiss her into submission. The problem was, he couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t be the one submitting. As much as he hated to admit it, the lass had cast a spell on him. Seeing her luscious curves, her plump, tempting lips, and a cascade of golden curls framing her face, it was all he could do to behave like the gentleman he needed to be and not the rogue he was.



LIZZIE STOOD GLARING at him, her foot tapping impatiently where she stood. She was angry. Angry that he thought she could so easily be dismissed despite the fact she had much more at stake than he did. Angry that he thought she needed him. Angry that she did need him. Angry that she wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life.

"Shall we?" A muscle flexed in his jaw as he motioned for her to proceed.

Lizzie threw her shoulders back and held her head high as she passed him. Sneaking a peak over her shoulder, she saw him shaking his head before scrubbing his fingers through his hair. She'd won, and he didn't like losing.

They took the governor's carriage into town. The man who drove had taken her father to town many times, but it seemed there wasn't a rut or hole he was capable of missing. Lizzie held on tightly as she was jostled back and forth. Rourke didn't seem to be having any problem sitting in one spot. His strong, muscled arms were crossed over his broad chest as he gazed out the window, never once looking her way.

If that was how he wanted to be... The carriage hit a particularly large rut and she found herself bounced right into his lap. She scrambled to move back to her own seat, but he had an iron grip on her.

"Ye'd better stay where ye are. It seems the driver is a blind man."

Lizzie almost laughed, but she controlled herself. The last thing she wanted was for Rourke to think she was amused by him. Besides, she was enjoying the sensation of a strong arm holding her securely. It reminded her of being pinned against a tree in the pouring rain. A small mewl of pleasure escaped her throat at the thought of what had transpired between them.

"Did ye say something?" he growled.

The deep sound of his voice cut right down to her core, and she squirmed in his lap, apparently causing him some discomfort.

"Sit still, lass." He moved her a bit, and she felt the hardness between his thighs as it poked her backside.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, although she wasn't. Not one bit. She moved again, this time knowing full well what she was doing.

"Enough," he whispered in her ear. "If yer no' careful, I'll be taking ye here in the carriage. Ye would no' want that now, would ye?"

She started to speak. She wanted to say she did, but the carriage came to a halt. Rourke moved her from his lap to her seat and then sat forward, placing his elbows on his knees, head in his hands.

"We're here," she said.

"I ken we're here. I need a moment, if ye doona mind." He sounded exasperated.

Lizzie smiled and glanced out the window at a scene that both frightened and fascinated her. Men, who she now knew to be pirates, were everywhere. They were armed with every weapon imaginable and appeared quite deadly. She scooted a bit closer to Rourke.

"Do ye see now why I wanted to leave ye behind?"

"I do."

"Ye'll obey me without question, do ye understand?" His stern voice left no room for disagreement.

The rebellious side of her wanted to say she didn't have to obey him, but the sensible side of her agreed. She bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from saying the wrong thing. "Yes."

He opened the door to the carriage and those nearby congregated around to see who was arriving. When Rourke stepped out, he was greeted with curiosity. They knew who he was, but not why he'd arrived in the governor's carriage.

He held out a hand for her, and she took it. As she set foot on the ground, a murmur erupted from the men, which turned into hoots, whistles, and lewd comments she was embarrassed to hear.

Rourke grabbed the man nearest to him by the throat. "Not another word from any of ye or ye'll answer to me." He released the man, tossing him aside as if he weighed nothing. The sea of men surrounding the carriage parted to make way for them to pass. He held tight to Lizzie's hand as he pulled her along behind him until they reached Red Legs Tavern.

Before they entered, Rourke turned to her. "Are ye ready?"

"I am." She wasn't, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing she wished she was home.



Chapter Nine

ENTERING RED LEGS Tavern, Lizzie was immediately thrown off balance by the loud and raucous scene before her. The rancid odor of unwashed bodies, smoke, and spirits turned her stomach. She wasn't sure her eyes could open any wider. She clutched Rourke's hand and arm, trying to get as close to him as she possibly could. Half-naked women sat astride men, engaged in activities that left little to the imagination. An odd curiosity overcame her, and she couldn't help but stare at what she was seeing.

"What have we here?" An elderly, white-haired man with a kindly smile approached them.

"Jacob!" Rourke appeared to know him.

"Is that ye, Rourke Mackall?" the man laughed.

"Ye ken it."

"And who is this lovely lass?"

"Lizette Wickham, daughter of the late governor," Rourke said.

"Late! I've only just arrived, what has happened?" The man seemed shocked to hear the news.

"Someone killed him in his home," Rourke answered.

"And ye're trying to find them." It was a statement not a question.

"We are."

The man gave Lizzie a once over as if sizing her up. It wasn't like the other men who hardly tried to cover what they were thinking as they ogled her. "And she's to help ye."

"Ye're a sharp one, Jacob," Rourke used his free hand to clap the man on the back.

"I'll help ye if I can," Jacob said.

"What would ye want in return?"

"A place on *The Dagger*. I find meself between ships." Jacob smiled

and revealed a somewhat toothless mouth.

"I won't ask why, but if ye find any useful information, I may be able to help ye."

"It must be useful then?" he asked.

"Aye, it must."

"Ye'll hear from me again. Miss." He bowed to Lizzie, who couldn't help but smile. "'Twas a pleasure."

"Stay close," Rourke cautioned Lizzie.

She didn't plan on letting go of him, so that shouldn't be a problem. As they made their way through the tavern, Lizzie was shocked to see some of the women who had been present for her father's burial. He was the governor, after all.

"You are bothered by what you see," Rourke said.

She didn't want to give him any more reason to believe he'd been right in not wanting to bring her along. "I'm not bothered, only surprised to see the women who were at the mansion yesterday."

He didn't believe her, and she could tell by his raised brows and smug grin.

"Where are we going?"

"Back here. Sit." They had reached the back of the tavern where several men stood, clearing a table for them. Rourke nodded his thanks as they staggered away.

A pitcher of ale was slammed down on the table in front of them along with two tankards. The red-haired, green-eyed woman who brought them threw an arm around Rourke's shoulders and he reciprocated the gesture with an arm around her waist. "Thank ye, lass."

Lizzie hoped it wasn't obvious she was staring, but she couldn't seem to help it. The woman's ample bosom was spilling over the top of her dress as she sat in Rourke's lap.

"Is there anythin' else I can do for ye, love?" She ran a finger along his chin.

Lizzie thought she was going to be sick. Rourke wasn't stopping her. In fact, he took her hand in his and kissed it. "There is something. Can you let it be known, discreetly of course, that I'm looking for the man who killed the governor?"

"It would be me pleasure, Cap'n Mackall." She winked at him and nodded to Lizzie as she walked away.

"Do you behave that way with every woman you meet?" Lizzie didn't hide the disapproval in her voice.

"Are ye jealous?" The smuggest, most maddening smile she'd ever set eyes on appeared on his face.

"Don't be silly. Why should I be jealous?"

"There is no reason, but ye are." The mischievous twinkle in his

eye told her he was teasing her and enjoying it.

"You are wrong, sir. I will not argue the point any further." He was right. She couldn't deny it to herself.

"As ye wish." He filled his tankard. "Would ye care for ale?"

"Thank you, no," she huffed.

"And now we wait."

An awkward silence followed. Rourke seemed comfortable enough as he leaned back in his chair while scanning the room. She on the other hand, chose to look down at her hands rather than continue to be assailed by the sight of men and women engaged in behavior that both fascinated and repulsed her.

Rourke sat up in his chair, causing her head to pop up. He nodded toward a shabbily dressed man limping toward them.

"I hear ye're seeking answers." The man sat at the table with them.

Lizzie leaned away from the man, who was a little too close for her liking.

"Aye. What do ye ken?" Rourke asked.

"That depends."

"On..."

"What ye're willing to pay."

Rourke took a bag of silver coin from inside his shirt and plunked it down on the table.

The man reached for it, but with lightning speed, Rourke stabbed the bag with his dirk, anchoring it to the table. The man's hand retreated.

"Now. What do ye ken about the governor's killer?"

"Only what I've heard here at the tavern and from Anna's lassies."

Rourke waited, impatiently tapping his fingers on the table.

"It's being said 'twas Agustin who done it," the man said, his eyes never leaving the bag of silver.

Lizzie glanced at Rourke.

"What of Pargo?" Rourke asked.

"He was there, but he didn't wish the governor dead. Agustin shot him on accident."

"Ye don't believe it."

"No' a word. He shot him, but he meant to do it." He reached for the silver.

"Not so fast. How do ye ken it?" Rourke pulled another dirk out from hiding, and the man's hands rose in the air.

"He's good with a pistol, ye ken. He's nay likely to make a mistake." No more movements toward the bag were made.

"Does Pargo know this?" Rourke asked.

"I believe he does. From what I'm hearing, he was looking for information from the gov'na. Was just about to get it when Agustin

shot the man.”

“Have ye heard anything about Pargo’s treasure?” Rourke asked.

“Nay, but I’d be wondering about Agustin.” The man offered.

“He’s his first mate. Is he no’ to be trusted?”

“I would no’.”

Rourke dislodged his knife from the table and handed the man the bag of coin, and he hurried away with it as fast as he could, despite the limp.

The serving wench appeared at their table again. “None for me?”

Rourke reached into another pouch and removed some silver, which he placed in the palm of her hand. “Where’s Anna?”

“Upstairs with a young lad.”

Rourke stood and held out a hand for Lizzie. She took it, and he guided her through the tavern to a set of stairs that led to the second landing.

“What’s up there?” she asked, glancing nervously around her.

“This is where the lassies bring their men once they prove they’ve enough coin to warrant some special treatment.”

“Do they think that’s why you’re bringing me up here?” she asked.

“I don’t care what they think, and neither should ye.”

“But I do. I’m not like them.”

He chuckled, irritating her more than she could say.

“Do you think I am?” she asked, feeling insulted.

“Do I think ye are what?” Was he purposely pretending he didn’t know what she meant and enjoying her irritation?

“Like them.” She nodded in the direction of downstairs, toward the women she’d defended earlier today as being ladies who deserved the same respect she received.

“Only time will tell.” He chuckled again as he climbed the last step to the landing and then shouted loudly. “Anna, are ye up here? It’s Rourke Mackall.”

A door opened further along the landing, and an older woman with graying hair stuck her head out. “I’m here, but I’m no’ open fer business.”

“That’s not why I’m here. I’ve some questions I hope ye can answer for me.” He headed for the door, and Lizzie had no choice but to follow.

“Come in then,” Anna said.

Rourke went first, followed by Lizzie. She was still steaming mad and wasn’t paying attention to what was right in front of her eyes.

“Lizzie!”

She looked up at the sound of the voice calling her name. “Daniel!”

The lad ran into his sister’s arms. She held him tight before lifting his face in her hands. “Are you well?”

“Yes. Mistress Anna has been taking care of me.” He smiled, turning his head toward Anna.

Lizzie glanced around the room, which was clean and neatly furnished. “No one has hurt you, have they?”

“No. We’ve been playing at cards and Anna has been reading to me.”

“I’m happy ye’re here,” Anna said to Rourke. “This is no place for a young lad like Daniel. He should be home where he belongs.”

“Pargo is paying well for yer help?” he asked.

“He is, but if ye’ve come to take him, ’tis for the best.” She placed a hand on Daniel’s head, ruffling his hair.

“He’ll come with us. Tell Pargo we forcibly took him from ye.”

“Aye. ’Twas me plan,” Anna replied.

“What do ye ken about his first mate?” Rourke asked.

“Agustin? He’s the one brought the lad to me.”

“Did he say anything at all about the governor or a treasure?”

“Ye might ask wee Sara. He spent some time and money with her before he left.”

“Can we speak with her?”

Anna opened the door and called out. “Sara! Get yer bony arse up here.” She turned back to Lizzie who was covering Daniel’s ears. “My apologies. He’s heard worse than that while he’s been here.” She directed a sweet smile at Daniel. “He’s a good lad. I’ve enjoyed his company.”

The door opened, and Sara came in. She seemed somewhat shy, which surprised Lizzie. She was a pretty brunette, who was quite thin. She looked to be about twenty years old. “Yes, ma’am.”

“The Cap’n has some questions for ye. He wants to know about Agustin. Did he tell ye anything?” Anna asked.

Sara seemed nervous and afraid to speak.

“Ye can tell ’em. He won’t hurt ye, no matter what ye’ve got to say,” Anna assured her.

She glanced around the room, her mouth set in a grim line. “He was happy when last I saw ’em. No’ like usual.” As she relayed the last bit, she shivered a little, rubbing her arms and holding them close to her body. “He had some treasure. Gave me a pretty blue gem for me troubles.”

“Did he say where he got the treasure?” Rourke asked.

She shook her head. “Said he was leaving and would no’ be back for a while.”

Rourke scrunched his brow and narrowed his eyes as he looked to Lizzie.

“What does that mean?” she asked him.

“It means he took the treasure. He let Pargo think yer father had

it.”

“But he shot my father.” Lizzie was still coming to grips with what had happened.

“He must have been worried about what yer father knew and what he would say to Pargo.”

Lizzie’s heart sank. She’d done her best to put the image of her father bleeding to death on the floor of his study out of her mind, and it all came rushing back to her in this one moment. She swayed on her feet, her sight growing dim.

“Lizzie!” Daniel called as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

Rourke rushed to her side, catching her as her legs gave way. “I’ve got ye, lass.” He cradled her in his arms.

She rested there, feeling safe and wishing everything would go back to the way it had been before her father’s murder.

“Here ye go, lass.” Anna handed her a tot of whisky. “Drink.”

Lizzie reluctantly swallowed the fiery liquid, sputtering and coughing as it made its way down to her belly, where it spread a soothing warmth that surprised her. “Thank you,” she managed to squeak out.



ROURKE HAD TO get Lizzie home. Despite her insistence on joining him, he should have left her behind, but there was more he needed to know before they could leave.

“Sara, one more question. Did he say where he was headed or which ship he’d be on?”

“Said he was going on one of the French ships that was leaving today. He had an agreement with the captain to plunder an English merchant vessel. In exchange for the booty he’d give the French cap’n, Augustin would take command of the ship.”

“Where would he get a crew?” Rourke wondered.

“Said he had one,” Sara offered.

“Thank ye, lass. Lizzie, we’d best get ye and Daniel back home. Can ye walk?”

“Yes. I’ll be fine.” She stood, taking Daniel’s hand. “Thank you for caring for my brother.”

“Ye’re welcome, Miss.”

Daniel let go of his sister’s hand so he could give Mistress Anna a hug. “Thank you.”

“’Twas my pleasure, lad.”

“Can I come visit you again?” he asked.

She looked past Daniel to Lizzie.

“Mistress Anna is a very busy woman.”

The look of disappointment on Daniel's face must have touched Lizzie. "Please," he pleaded.

"Ye do as yer sister says," Anna said, patting the top of his head.

"If Mistress Anna has the time, perhaps she could come to the house for a visit," Lizzie said.

"Oh, yes, please say you'll come." Daniel's face was alight with happiness.

Anna smiled warmly and nodded her head. "I'd be happy to."

"As touching as this all is, we must go. Come." Rourke held up his arm and ushered Lizzie and Daniel out. Looking back, he saw what he thought might be tears forming in Anna's eyes, but she turned her back to him before he could be sure.

They hurried back to the carriage, which was thankfully still waiting for them. The driver had armed himself with a musket that he held up as they approached, a look of relief on his face.

"Any trouble?" Rourke asked as he opened the door and helped Lizzie and Daniel inside.

"No, sir. I was sure to let them know I was armed and wouldn't hesitate to shoot if necessary."

A few stragglers still lingered nearby. They apparently were under the mistaken impression there was something of value inside, but once they saw Rourke return, they knew their chances of robbing the carriage were greatly diminished and so they wandered off.

"Home, please," Rourke said.

The carriage traveled back to the mansion over the same rutted roads they'd encountered before, but this time, they had a young lad with them who loved being jostled about. He laughed uncontrollably each time he was bounced out of his seat.

Rourke couldn't help but smile as he observed him. Lizzie was sitting with Daniel on the other side of the carriage, so he had a perfect view of them both. She was doing her best to hold him in place, but she was being jostled just as much. Her composure only lasted so long before she joined her brother in a fit of giggles. In the midst of everything that had been happening over the last few days, there was a welcomed lightness in all their moods.

Rourke couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be a part of this little family, even though he understood that it was not his destiny to be a family man. It was something he'd never given much thought to. At least not until this very moment.



Chapter Ten

“DANIEL, WELCOME HOME!” Maria said as she hurried forward to embrace him. “Oh, how I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” he said, hugging her back.

“He’s home and safe,” Lizzie said. “I feel at ease for the first time in days.”

“Where did you find him?” Maria asked.

“At the tavern,” Lizzie said, smiling indulgently at her brother.

Maria’s eyes opened wide as did her mouth. “Did they treat you well?”

“They did. Mistress Anna was so kind to me. I will never forget it.”

“I will make your favorite supper.” Maria held Daniel’s face in her hands. “Would you like to help me?”

He nodded eagerly and grasped her hand, following her to the kitchen.

Lizzie watched them go. “Rourke, thank you.” She turned to find him standing right behind her, close enough to touch, but she stayed her hand. “I don’t know what I would have done without your help. I imagine you’ll be leaving us now.” She could hear the disappointment in her own voice. She couldn’t stop him if he chose to go.

“I have one more thing I must do.” The always-confident man was acting as if he had no idea what to do with his hands.

Was she reading him wrong, or did he wish to touch her as much as she wanted him to? “What is that?”

“I must speak to Pargo and then I intend to find Agustin.”

She shouldn’t be shocked or surprised he was planning to go after Agustin. “How?”

“Ye need no’ concern yerself with that. Ye’re safe here. When I’ve avenged yer father, I will return and then we’ll see what that key

unlocks.”

She controlled her excitement. He was coming back. “What do you think happened to my father’s soldiers? They’re no longer here. Guyton hasn’t seen them in days.”

“I have my suspicions they’re with Agustin. Whatever he was up to seems to have been planned out over a long time.”

“I wonder if the plan all along was to kill my father.” Lizzie looked to Rourke for an answer.

“I believe you were all in danger, and may still be.”

She shuddered at the thought.



“STAY WITH GUYTON, Daniel,” Lizzie said as she watched the two walk out to the herb garden after they’d finished their meal.

The sun was setting in a riot of pink, gold, and purple. The beauty of the sky could not diminish her worry that Pargo would find out Daniel was no longer with Anna. If he did, would he come here to find him?

“Guyton knows to call to me if there are any visitors.” Rourke seemed to hear her unspoken thoughts as he placed his hands on her shoulders from behind. “Come. There is no need for worry. Daniel is home. Ye’re here, and so am I.”

“You’re right,” she conceded. “I wish this was all over and done.”

“I understand yer fear. Pargo isn’t a man to be underestimated. It is not by chance he has a fearsome reputation, but as I’ve told ye, so do I. It would no’ be in his best interest to anger me.”

Lizzie turned quickly into his arms before she could change her mind and back away. She wasn’t disappointed. His hands caressed her arms, sending a shiver of desire through her. There was something dangerous and thrilling about the man that caused her to lose all sensibility when he was near. No proper lady would have the thoughts and yearnings she was visited by every time she laid eyes on him.

Her father had asked him to take care of her, and he was fulfilling that promise. She wanted more than protection from him. How could she let him know without saying the words? Without appearing to have the morals of those women she saw at the tavern. Waiting until marriage before giving herself to a man was the proper thing to do, but she wanted Rourke, and he’d already told her he wasn’t the marrying kind. He had a ship, a crew, and a love of the sea. She doubted he’d give that life up for her.

She wrestled with these thoughts as she gazed up into stormy, grey eyes that seemed to say they wanted her, too. Could she give herself fully to him knowing theirs might be only a brief interlude?

Rourke caressed her cheek with a tenderness that touched her heart. "Ye're a beautiful woman, Lizzie. It is time for ye to live yer life. Yer father is gone, there is nothing holding ye back."

What was he trying to say? She hoped her eyes conveyed how much he meant to her. How much she wanted him.

He lifted her hand, kissing the tips of her fingers, his gaze never wavering from hers. She was his captive, unable to move, unable to breathe. Caught in the moment, she was unsure what to do, but she knew she wanted to kiss him. Taking in a deep breath, she touched her lips to his. It was a sweet, gentle kiss that he accepted and returned. Holding her face between his hands, he dipped his head to take her mouth. A flutter of hummingbird wings beat frantically in Lizzie's belly. Her hands shook, not with fear, but with desire.

"Lizzie, I want ye," He whispered in her ear.

"And I, you," Lizzie answered in a breathy tone.

"I can no' promise ye more than this night."

She had a million reasons to wish for more, but she would take what he could give her. The ache she felt for him outweighed any thought of propriety. He would be hers tonight, and that would have to be enough.



ROURKE LED LIZZIE up to her bedchamber. He was acutely aware of the fact that this would be her first time, and he wanted to be sure this was what she wanted. Reaching her door, he stopped, turning her to face him. "Lizzie, are ye sure this is what ye want?"

Without hesitation, she answered. "Yes. Very much."

He opened the door to Lizzie's room. Beautifully decorated with floral, upholstered chairs and bed covers of a rosy pink, it was exactly as he expected. It was the essence of the woman he found himself falling in love with. He gently closed the door behind them. He'd never made love to a woman like Lizzie. The women he'd been with had been a mere convenience. They were the women in every port of call who filled the needs of men of the sea.

Lizzie was looking to him for guidance. Wanting to put her at ease, he pulled her gently into his arms. As he held her close, his hands moved over the back of her dress in search of fasteners or ties. His nerves were getting the best of him, causing him to fumble when he should have been sure. His clumsy attempt at undressing her wasn't lost on Lizzie, because she pushed him back as light laughter slipped from her lips.

"Do ye laugh at me?" he asked, feigning hurt feelings.

"You must admit, you don't know the first thing about undressing

women.”

“On the contrary. I’ve had much experience, but never with a woman like you.”

“You’ve been with women before?” she teased, feigning surprise.

“I have, but they are usually no’ clad in such lovely attire.”

“Sit.” Lizzie motioned to a chair beside the bed as she began removing her robe, stomacher, and petticoat. Each item was delicately laid aside as it came off. Rourke found himself mesmerized by her movements. He grew hard watching her, but he stayed where he was. When she reached her corset, she crooked a finger and called him to her. Her perfect breasts spilled over the top, and he took the opportunity to run the back of his hand over the tops of them.

She needed help untying the snug fitting garment, but first, he reached for her, holding her around the waist and kissing the tops of those tempting breasts which would be fully exposed to him in moments. He wanted her to feel his hardness as it pressed into her belly.

A small *ooh* escaped her lips. Her eyes opened wide, the pupils growing large and dark with desire. He was pleased with her reaction. He turned her so that her back faced him and he undid the laces on her corset. A perfectly rounded backside now faced him as the corset joined the rest of her discarded clothing. All that remained was her cotton shift.

Rourke was nearly bursting from his breeches as he watched her remove the last of her clothing. Standing naked before him, he was quite sure he’d never seen a more perfect woman.



GOOSEFLUSH COVERED HER as she waited. Rourke was gazing at her with the look of a ravenous predator, but she wasn’t frightened by it. He removed his shirt. A light sprinkling of hair covered his muscular chest, trailed down his belly and across more muscle, then disappeared below the waist of his breeches. The need to touch him overwhelmed her. Her hand grazed his arms, then her fingers traced the hair across his chest. Her exploration came to a halt at a jagged scar that almost resembled a lightning bolt in shape. She tentatively touched it, gazing up into his face to see if she had hurt him, but instead of looking pained, his eyes told a different story. She touched the scar again, this time covering it with her hand. He cupped his hand over hers, then raised her palm to his lips in a tender kiss.

Rourke lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed where he gently set her down. He removed his boots and then his breeches before quickly joining her.

Lizzie had never seen a naked man before and wanted a longer look. She knew she shouldn't ask. It wouldn't be appropriate behavior, but she felt comfortable with Rourke. Surely he wouldn't mind. Her curiosity was getting the better of her. "I want to see you," she whispered, somewhat embarrassed by her forwardness.

He seemed surprised by her request, but said nothing.

"You took advantage of my nakedness, now I would like the same courtesy, to see you."

A mischievous grin spread across his face as he sprang up from the bed. Lizzie rolled onto her side, propping her head on her elbow for a better view. Rourke raised his arms out to the side and slowly turned for her. *So that is what a man looks like*, she thought. She stared at his erection. It was long, hard, and standing up straight. It fascinated her, and as he returned to the bed, she had to touch it.

Rourke growled as she wrapped her hand around his length. It was obvious from the expression on his face that she was giving him much pleasure.

"For a lass of no experience, ye seem to ken what ye're doing," Rourke said, removing her hand and drawing her to his body.

"But I don't."

"I ken 'tis yer first time. I'll be gentle with ye," he assured her. He wrapped a leg over hers as he moved her hair out of the way so he could kiss behind her ear.

"Mmm..."

"Ye like that, do ye?"

"Yes."

His kisses were soft and sweet as his lips traveled from her neck to her breasts. He took them in his hands. "Beautiful," he said, admiring her.

His hands encircled her waist as his tongue flicked across her belly and then down beneath the vee of curls at her opening. She cried out as his tongue gave her a rapturous pleasure she'd never known before. With each soft moan, Rourke seemed more intent on pleasing her. Her fingers raked through his hair as she was overcome with an intense need that built and built until it exploded inside of her. She writhed in ecstasy as Rourke held on to her hips, not allowing her to escape his caresses as the momentous waves of pleasure overtook her until she thought she might die.

With one last kiss, Rourke slowly moved up from between her legs until he was atop her and had placed his hardened shaft at her opening. "I will go slow. I doona mean to hurt ye."

Lost as she was in that sensual fog, Lizzie couldn't imagine anything he could do that might hurt her. She was still catching her breath when he entered her slowly. His lips met hers with passion as

his tongue tangled with hers at the same time he glided more fully into her. She squirmed beneath him, in slight pain. He waited a moment, and she nodded her affirmation that the discomfort had subsided, and the pain was replaced with a new and enjoyable sensation. At first unsure of herself, Lizzie quickly realized that if she moved in rhythm with him, all the pleasure she'd felt before would return.

Moving more quickly now, Rourke raised himself up on his arms. She could see the rapture in his face as her own breathing quickened. The tingling and throbbing were building again. Climbing and climbing until she reached the peak of something perfect and indescribable. Rourke roared her name as he reached his climax.

Collapsing atop her, he rolled to his side, taking her with him and holding her close. He stared into her eyes, "Lizzie, love..." His warm, sweet smile reminded her of just how handsome he was.

She fell asleep in his arms happier than she'd ever been, and yet in the back of her mind, knew he would leave her.



Chapter Eleven

THE SUN HAD barely risen when Rourke's skiff approached *Las Animas*. Pargo awaited him on deck surrounded by his crew. His first mate was nowhere in sight, which only confirmed the information Sara had given them at the tavern.

"I see you do not bring me my treasure," Pargo said as Rourke hopped over the rail followed by Hawes and a few trusted crewmembers.

Pargo's men aimed pistols, swords, and daggers at them, but Rourke wasn't intimidated. "I doona, but I ken where it is, or at least who has it."

"Leave your men and follow me." Pargo signaled his men to stand fast as he turned toward his quarters. Rourke nodded to Hawes and followed behind.

Once inside with the door firmly closed, Pargo turned to Rourke. "Tell me what you know."

"Your first mate, Agustin, is the one who took your treasure. He is also the one who killed the governor. I believe you were present, so that much ye ken."

"*Dios mío!*" Pargo slammed his fist on his desk. "Where is he?"

"He has sailed with the French vessel, *Sirène*. If what I've heard is true, he had word of an English merchant sailing toward these waters. The information was shared, money changed hands, and the French will help him take the ship, which he intends to captain."

Dark, stormy eyes glared at him from beneath a furrowed brow. "I should have known," he growled.

"How is it that ye didn't?" Rourke asked with a good deal of sarcasm in his tone.

"I trusted him more than I should have." Pargo ignored the

obvious intent of Rourke's question.

"Why did he kill the governor if it was no' at your command?"

Pargo shrugged. "It was not supposed to happen. I thought the governor had stolen my treasure."

"He may have had a hand in stealing it," Rourke admitted.

"I wished to frighten him into revealing its location. Agustin held him at pistol point. I heard his daughter calling, and when the governor believed I might harm her, he was ready to tell me everything. Agustin shot him. He must have known Wickham's daughter was more important to him than any treasure, and feared what he would tell me."

"Ye thought it was an accidental shooting?" Rourke asked, not sure he should believe him.

"Sí." Pargo was pacing back and forth, seething with anger. "I must sail after him."

"My crew are down on the docks. They'll get the information you need to find him."

"Will you join me?" Pargo asked.

"Tis why I'm here. I would be happy to avenge my friend's murder." Rourke went to the door. "I'll prepare my ship and signal ye when we're ready to set sail."



WHEN LIZZIE WOKE that morning, she was surprised to find that Rourke was no longer in her bed. She dressed and hurried downstairs to see if he was in the kitchen having something to eat. She was ravenous, but lost her appetite when she realized he wasn't there or anywhere else in the house.

"Guyton!" she called.

"Yes, Miss." he answered as he came hurrying to her.

"Where is Captain Mackall?"

"He's gone back to his ship."

"Will he return?" Panic struck. He was gone.

"I don't believe so. He said goodbye to Daniel before he left. It seemed he planned to be gone for some time."

Lizzie closed her eyes against the stinging tears gathering there. She would not cry, but she also wouldn't allow him to leave without seeing him.

"Thank you, Guyton. I may be gone for a while, but I'll be back. Make sure that Daniel is safe."

"Yes, Miss."

Her feet couldn't move fast enough. She had to find him before he was gone forever. She summoned the carriage to take her to the

docks, and once there, she scanned the faces of the men. Lizzie looked for someone familiar who could help her, but saw no one she knew.

"Leave me here," she said to the driver.

"But, Miss, how will you get home?" the driver asked, concern etched across his face.

"Don't worry. Captain Mackall will see that I get home safely," she lied.

As the carriage drove away, she made her way past men lining the path to Red Legs Tavern. It was the only place she could think of where someone might be able to help her.

The same scene she'd observed the day before greeted her again. She saw Sara talking with a man and hurried to her.

"Sara." Lizzie was out of breath and feeling quite nervous as nearby groups of men ogled her and made lewd comments.

"Miss Lizette, what are you doing here?" Sara asked. "I'll be back, wait for me," she said to the man before taking Lizzie by the arm and leading her upstairs. "It's dangerous for a lady like you to be here alone."

"I'm looking for Captain Mackall." She folded her hands neatly in front of her to stop them from shaking.

"He's no' here."

"I need to get to his ship. Is there someone here who can help me?" Lizzie asked.

"One of his men is here," Mistress Anna said as she appeared in the doorway to her rooms.

"Sara, go get Jordy Reeves before he leaves."

Sara ran back down the stairs, leaving Lizzie alone with Anna. "Thank you again for taking such good care of Daniel. He told me how kind you were to him."

Anna's face softened as Lizzie spoke. "He's a good lad. I was happy to spend time with him."

A man arrived at the top of the stairs and stopped as he reached them. "Sara says ye need me." He eyed both women.

"Not for what yer thinking," Anna said. "Miss Lizette Wickham requires passage to *The Dagger*. Will you see that she gets there?"

The man seemed confused by this request, but nodded. "Aye. I can do that for ye. Does the cap'n ken yer coming?"

"No. It's a surprise."

"I see. I'll gather the men. Sara will see that ye find our skiff."

"Thank you," Lizzie said as he hurried down the stairs. She turned to see Anna shaking her head. "What's wrong?"

"Rourke will no' be happy to see ye," Anna said.

"Why wouldn't he?" Lizzie thought he would be very happy to see her. She hadn't thought there would be any reason he wouldn't.

“He wants to protect ye. A woman such as yerself does no’ belong aboard a pirate ship,” Anna cautioned.

“I must see him before he leaves.”

“Ye love him.” It wasn’t a question. It was a statement, one that Lizzie couldn’t deny. “I can see it in yer eyes.”

What could she say? She did love him. How or when that had happened, she couldn’t say. The only thing she did know was that she wasn’t going to let him sail out of her life forever without seeing him one more time.

“Be careful. These men are dangerous. Ye risk much to see the captain.” She approached the railing and looking down, seemed to search the tavern. “Sara!” She called.

“Aye.”

“Take Miss Wickham to Jordy at the docks.”

Lizette made her way downstairs and scurried out of the tavern while avoiding groping hands and words she wished not to hear.

Sara led her through the streets and down an alleyway to the docks. Jordy stood waiting for her. The other men were already aboard the boat, including Jacob.

“Good day to ye, Miss. We meet again,” he called to her.

“Jacob,” she replied. “Good day.”

Hoots and cheers greeted Sara as they approached, leading Lizzie to wonder if there might be another way to get to *The Dagger*. Jordy held out a dirty, callused hand to her. Drawing in a deep breath, she took it and stepped into the boat where the men made room for her to sit. Sara waved from the dock as the men rowed towards Rourke’s ship.

“When did the ship return to the harbor?” Lizzie asked.

“Cap’n had us move her after the storm so we could load up on provisions.”

This confirmed her fears. He planned on leaving without even a goodbye. She couldn’t regret what had happened between them the night before. It had been what she wanted, and he’d told her he couldn’t promise more than the one night. The mere thought of his passionate kisses and the way he’d touched her sent a flush of heat through her body. She glanced up to see that none of the men were paying the least bit of attention to her, which was a relief.

The boat came to a stop at the base of the rope ladder. Jamie, the cabin boy, looked over the rail. A surprised smile brightened his face. “Don’t worry, Miss. I will no’ let ye fall.” He scrambled down the ladder, and when he neared the bottom, he held out a hand to her.

Jordy helped her stand and guided her to the ropes. “Excuse me fer what I’m about to do, Miss.” He placed his hands on her waist, steadying her so she could grab onto the ladder. As she stepped on the

first rung, he gave her backside a push upward with both his hands.

Lizzie was mortified, but said not a word. It had been different when Rourke had done it. She silently vowed that in future, she would climb the ladder without help, no matter how long it took her.

Jamie led the way up, peering back down at her with every rung she climbed. Jordy was behind her, and she could feel his hands occasionally on her foot or leg as she stepped upward. Finally at the top, Jamie helped her onto deck. She nearly collapsed with relief.

"Where's Captain Mackall?" she asked him.

"He's on *Las Animas*. Why are ye here?" He seemed puzzled by her presence. "The cap'n did no' tell me ye were joining us."

"I wished to see him. Will you take me to his quarters? I'll wait for him there." Lizzie could feel the eyes of the crew on her, and she wanted to escape their scrutiny as soon as possible.

"Aye." Jamie led the way.

"Doona worry, Miss. I will no' say a word," Jordy called after them.

"What did he mean by that?" Jamie asked as he opened the door to the cabin.

"I wish to surprise the captain."

"Would ye like some tea?" he asked.

"That would be lovely, Jamie."

"I'll be back." With a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, he placed his index finger to his lips. "I'll no' say a word, either."



ROURKE WAS BACK aboard *The Dagger* after his meeting with Pargo. He ordered his men to prepare the ship to set sail.

"Jordy, what did ye learn about Agustin?" Jacob stood behind Jordy. "Where did ye find him?"

"Good day to ye, Cap'n," Jacob said.

"He said he had information for ye about *La Sirène*. Said it set sail in the dark of night."

"What else do ye ken, Jacob?"

"There was no word on where they were headed, but I did find out the whereabouts of the English merchant ship. There are some very important passengers aboard who are being transported to the colonies."

"Was there word on who the passengers might be?" Rourke pressed.

"None, but the ship also carries a good deal of loot."

"I promised ye a place aboard *The Dagger*, and it seems ye've earned it."

“Thank ye, sir.”

“Jordy will see ye get settled.” Rourke turned to his first mate. “Hawes, signal *Las Animas*. We’ll find the English ship and board her.”

He’d discussed this plan with Pargo and they’d agreed. Both men were only concerned with Agustin and Pargo’s treasure. It was their understanding that the ship carried everyday goods such as clothing, furniture, tools, and leather goods. Neither he nor Pargo were interested.

The Dagger was underway in less than an hour. The prevailing winds would carry them directly to their target. Both *The Dagger* and *Las Animas* were built for speed. The French vessel was a bit more cumbersome. On the vast sea they sailed, chances were good they would pass *La Sirène* without even seeing her. It was important for them to reach *The Rebecca* before Agustin and the French. There they would lie in wait for their arrival. It was a good plan and one he hoped would see *The Dagger* return to Manta Cay without damage or casualties.

Everything on deck was going as planned. Hawes and the crew all knew their jobs and were good at them. This gave Rourke some time to think about last night and Lizzie. He hadn’t wanted to leave her without a goodbye, but he knew that given the chance, she would have insisted on joining him. He wanted her safe and far away from the coming battle. He hadn’t seen it happening, but he had somehow fallen in love with her, which had him rethinking everything in his life.

He wanted to be with her, but didn’t wish to subject her to life with a pirate. He had a lot of thinking to do and it seemed that now he would have the time. There would be little else to do until they reached *The Rebecca*.

“I’m going to my quarters if ye need me, Hawes.”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

Jamie tagged along beside him with a joyful bounce in his step.

“What are ye so happy about?” Rourke asked.

Jamie shrugged, but the smile on his face grew even larger.

Rourke eyed him with a furrowed brow. “I doona ken what yer about, lad, but it must be something.”

He opened the door to his quarters and walked inside. His attention focused on Jamie, it took a moment for him to realize there was someone waiting for him in the room. When he saw Lizzie, he had mixed emotions. His heart soared at the sight of her and then plummeted as he realized she would now be in danger.

“What are ye doing here?” he barked. “How did ye get here?” He’d have the heads of whoever had seen fit to bring her.

Jamie turned and bolted through the door, but Rourke’s long reach

grabbed him by the shirt collar. "Is this why ye were so giddy?"

The lad ducked as though he expected to be pummeled.

"Well, answer me!"

"Aye." Jamie wriggled free and ran.

Rourke turned his anger on Lizzie. "How dare ye come aboard my ship without permission."

"You left me," she said.

"Because I didn't want ye with me," he shouted.

"I see. So, all those pretty words ye said to me last night were lies." She raised her voice to match his.

"Doona put words in my mouth, lass. Do ye ken how dangerous it is fer ye to be here? Do ye realize we're on our way to battle a French vessel? There will be guns blasting, bloodshed, and this ship could possibly end up at the bottom of the sea." He fought to control himself as he stalked across the floor to stand nose-to-nose with her, something he was becoming more and more familiar with.

"You didn't say goodbye."

"So ye decided to sneak aboard my ship to hear me say those words to ye."

"Don't raise your voice at me."

"I'll raise my voice as I see fit. Ye're a headstrong lass who needs to understand ye can no' always do as ye please."

"My father never spoke to me this way."

"I'm no' yer father." She was infuriating.

Lizzie backed away from him and he followed, forcing her up against his desk. "Leave me alone," she said, shoving him.

It had little effect. He stood his ground. "Ye're aboard *my* ship, and ye'll do as I say. Do ye understand?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she glared at him with fire in her eyes and an angry pout on her lips.

"I'm yer captain and ye'll obey me like any other member of my crew. I can no' turn this ship around and bring ye back to Manta Cay. I've a rendezvous with *Las Animas*, so I've no choice but to allow ye to stay."

She turned her face away from him, but he caught her chin and forced her to look at him. "Why was it so important to see me?"

"I was afraid I'd never see you again." Her voice was soft and free of any anger. "I wanted..." Her voice trailed off.

"What did ye want?"

"I wanted to tell ye something I didn't say last night."

"Well, say it now." He could see tears forming in her eyes, but she quickly blinked to stop them from falling.

"I no longer wish to," she sniffled.

Damn it all, he'd made her cry. Maybe that was a good thing.

Maybe he'd gotten through to her. She didn't realize what she meant to him. If anything happened to her, he would never be able to forgive himself.

"Do no' leave my quarters. That is an order from yer captain." He turned and stormed out, slamming the door behind him.



LIZZIE WAS DEVASTATED. When she'd decided to surprise him, she hadn't realized how angry he'd be, but she also didn't realize the danger she'd be putting herself in. She slumped down on the edge of the bed. "Stop it," she said to herself. She scrubbed at her eyes, wiping away the tears. It had been a mistake to think he'd be happy to see her. It was obviously a mistake to think he felt the same way she did, but there was nothing she could do about it now. She was on his ship, far away from home and her brother. Her impulsive act may have taken her away from Daniel forever.

"Miss?" Jamie's voice was soft and filled with sympathy as he appeared out of nowhere with a kerchief in hand. "Doona cry. The captain gets angry with me and yells, but he'd never hit me, and he won't hit ye."

"I wasn't worried he'd hit me, Jamie." She took the kerchief from his hand and wiped her eyes and nose.

"He's only angry because he cares for ye."

She tipped her head, scrunching her brows. She had no experience with men other than her father, and so she wondered if this could be true. "I don't understand."

"If he didn't care, why would he be so angry? He's worried ye will no' be safe here. Bad things can happen in the blink of an eye."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked.

"All of it." He took her hand in his, patting it gently if not awkwardly. "He asked me to come sit with ye. Said ye was upset."

"Oh." Maybe he did care.

"Do ye play cards?" Jamie asked, moving toward a box atop Rourke's desk.

"I do."

"We can pass the time with a game or two, if ye like," he said. He lifted the top off the box and removed a deck of cards. "Come, sit here." He sat in Rourke's chair behind the desk after he moved another chair for Lizzie to join him.

"What shall we play for?" Lizzie asked. She often played with Daniel. He was too young for any games of skill, but they played simple games that he could win.

"Have ye any silver?" he asked.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Then we’ll play for buttons. He removed a coin bag from the box and dumped it onto the desk. He then divided the buttons up into two piles, pushing one toward Lizzie.

Jamie dealt the first hand, and Lizzie relaxed. Rourke was kind to send him to sit with her. He would help take her mind off of their argument and the dangers they might be facing.



Chapter Twelve

“SAIL HO!” JORDY called from the crow’s nest.

Hawes handed Rourke his spyglass, and the captain scanned the horizon until he saw the sails of *The Rebecca* come into view. Pargo’s ship was running alongside *The Dagger* as they moved in tandem toward their target. Far in the distance behind them, another ship sailed. Rourke’s gut told him it would be *La Sirène*, although they weren’t close enough yet to be sure.

He instructed his men to head toward *The Rebecca*, and signaled Pargo’s crew to do the same. They would catch her in no time. The merchant ship was larger and therefore slower. Both Rourke and Pargo sailed sloops which were faster and more maneuverable. If they meant to chase a ship like *The Rebecca*, her crew wouldn’t stand a chance of escape. Red flags were hoisted up on both ships. This would signal the merchant that if they surrendered without a fight, the crew would be spared, but no quarter would be given to any who resisted. Normally the sight of the red flag was enough, but not in all cases. They would find out soon enough.

As they approached, it was apparent the crew of *The Rebecca* would allow them to board freely. Rourke’s ship approached from starboard, and Pargo from the port side. Once *The Rebecca* was between them, and her crew was visible on deck, men from both *The Dagger* and *Las Animas* began boarding, some swinging across on ropes and others using gangplanks laid between the ships. The crew of *The Rebecca* had dropped their weapons on deck and were not planning to resist.

Once Rourke and Pargo were aboard, they sought out the captain who was in his quarters with two other men, who must be the passengers they’d been told about.

Captain Forsythe stood in front of the other men, bravely guarding them from Rourke and Pargo.

"Captain," Rourke said. "I am Rourke Mackall and this is Amaro Pargo. We come in peace and will leave yer ship as we've found it."

"Then why have you boarded us, sir?" Forsythe asked, appearing puzzled.

"We have no quarrel with ye, but with another ship that has its sights set on *The Rebecca*. We offer ye our protection in exchange for yer help," Ross explained.

"How may we assist you?"

"We wish to remain unseen until the French ship is upon ye."

"So you want us to be a sacrificial lamb for your purposes?"

"That is one way to put it, but there will be no sacrifice on yer part."

"We will do our part. I must see that these gentlemen arrive in the Carolinas unharmed. They are emissaries of the king headed to Charleston to visit the governor there."

"I'll personally see to it," Rourke assured him. "Once we have taken care of the French, I will be happy to escort ye the rest of the way to Charleston."

"You will be rewarded handsomely, sir," one of the emissaries said. "The king will be pleased to know of your willingness to help us."

Rourke didn't really care what the king thought, but it couldn't hurt to have these two men put in a good word for him and his crew. "The plan is to position ourselves so we will not be visible as they approach. Once the French ship is just beyond where they can reach us with their canons, I will signal to ye. Ye will sail away from us as quickly as possible, and we will engage them."

The captain nodded. "I'll prepare the crew."

Rourke and Pargo, along with their crews, went back to their ships to wait. As luck would have it, a low fog rolled in, limiting visibility. *La Sirène's* approach was silent, but she could be seen through the murkiness as she neared. It wouldn't be long now. Rourke was sure Agustin and the captain must be wondering why the English merchant was sitting dead in the water, but they would likely look on that as lucky for them. They would soon find out just how unlucky they truly were.



JAMIE WAS DOING his best to continue entertaining Lizzie as his captain had no doubt ordered, but Lizzie was becoming increasingly uneasy. It was clear the ships were no longer moving. The sounds of men scrambling around on deck told her something was about to

happen.

"Doona worry, Miss. Cap'n Rourke be a good cap'n." Jamie said, obviously noticing that she was nervous.

"What's going on?" she asked, peering at the cabin door.

"They're boarding another ship." He gathered up the cards from the desk.

"Are they planning to plunder it?" she asked.

"The cap'n didn't tell me. 'Tis usually what happens."

Lizzie bit her lower lip. She couldn't possibly concentrate on a card game now. At any rate, Jamie had won all her buttons. She couldn't be sure if he was cheating or not, but it didn't matter. He was a sweet young man and he'd done exactly what he'd been asked to do. Unfortunately, she was now all too aware that something was happening on deck and she had no idea what.

"Jamie can we see what's going on?" she asked.

"No, Miss. The cap'n would have me head."

"I understand," she said. "But you could leave me for a few minutes to find out though, couldn't you?"

Jamie tipped his head, seeming to think about what she'd said. "I could."

"Would you?"

"I'll be right back." He was out the door in the blink of an eye.

Lizzie waited for him to come back, resisting the urge to open the door and see for herself. When he didn't return right away, she began to worry. What if he didn't come back? What if something happened to Rourke? She had to make sure that wasn't the case. She opened the door a crack, but couldn't see anything, so she opened the door further and stepped out onto the quarterdeck. Before she had a chance to move, she was knocked to the ground and held down as a cannon ball whizzed overhead.

"Jamie!" Rourke roared. "Lizzie, I told ye to stay in my quarters." There was anger in his voice, but also concern. "Ye could have been killed." He rolled off of her and stood. "Take my hand." She did, and he helped her up and then hurried her back inside.

"Cap'n," Jamie said as he came through the door. "Ye were looking for me."

"Why did ye leave her alone?"

"Don't be angry with him. I asked him to see what was happening. I was worried."

"Ye are not his captain. He does no' take orders from ye." He ran his hand down his face. "Stay here. If I see either of ye out on deck again, there'll be hell to pay. Do ye ken?"

"Aye," Jamie said.

Lizzie nodded.

Rourke grabbed a pistol and handed it to Jamie. "Protect her."

He slipped out the door to the sound of bullets, cannon fire, and shouts.



THEY'D CAUGHT THE French ship by surprise. Rourke gave Pargo cover so that *Las Animas* could approach unnoticed in the midst of cannon fire and fog. Care was taken not to hit the Spanish corsair, and to this point, he'd accomplished his goal. Pargo and his men were boarding the ship. Sounds of gunfire, the clanging of swords, and the cries of the men all echoed eerily through the fog.

Rourke knifed his ship through the water, getting close enough to board *La Sirène* from the starboard side. As *The Dagger* approached, the crew of the French vessel, in an effort to avoid certain death at the hands of Pargo's crew, leaped aboard *The Dagger* and engaged Rourke and his men. Agustin was among them. Rourke fought his way through man after man, eventually reaching the one he sought.

"Agustin!" Rourke would never kill a man whose back was to him.

Pargo's first mate turned to face him with venom in his eyes.

The two men stared silently at each other, ready for a fight. Rourke nodded to Agustin who lunged toward him with deadly speed and accuracy, but Rourke was just as fast. He parried the blow by blocking it with his sword. They slashed at each other, dancing back and forth across the deck. The crew, having dispatched the French aboard *The Dagger*, swung into action aboard *La Sirène*, leaving Rourke to battle Agustin on his own.

Rourke stepped back to avoid Agustin's sword, but as he did, he tripped over a body and found himself falling back with Agustin's sword at his throat.

"Adios, Señor," Agustin raised his sword and at the same time, Rourke kicked his legs out from under him, a shot rang out. Agustin's sword flew from his hand as he fell to the deck wounded.

Jumping to his feet, Rourke was shocked to see Lizzie standing there with the pistol he'd given Jamie. She had it pointed at Agustin.

"Lizzie," Rourke said. He looked down at Agustin, who was writhing in pain on the deck, no longer a threat.

"He killed my father. I wasn't about to let him kill you," she said.

Her face was without emotion. Rourke went to her and took the pistol from her quivering hands. She fell into his arms, tears bursting forth as she cried uncontrollably. He handed the gun to Jamie. "Keep an eye on him." He motioned to Agustin.

Glancing around, he noted the fighting had come to an end. The crew were returning to the ship with sacks full of treasure. Pargo

joined them.

"I'll take care of him," he said, looking down at Agustin.

"Did you find your treasure?" Rourke asked.

"Sí. The French captain was happy to surrender it to me." Two of his men dragged Agustin across the deck. "He will pay for what he's done." He turned and crossed back to the French ship where the men were busy dividing up the loot they'd found.

Rourke led Lizzie back to his quarters. Jamie followed, but stopped at the door.

"Ye ken what needs to be done," Rourke said. "Get to work."

"Aye, Cap'n." Jamie turned and began retrieving weapons from the bodies lying on deck.

Once inside his cabin, Rourke poured whisky for himself and Lizzie. "Drink this," he said, handing it to her. "Ye'll feel better."

She wrinkled her nose at it, but he insisted, and she didn't resist. He gently wiped the tears from her eyes with his kerchief. "Thank ye for saving me. Though I was about to get the better of the man."

Lizzie appeared amused by this as a small smile appeared on her lips.

"I imagine in the future, ye're never going to listen to me. Is that true?"

"It's possible."

There was a knock at the door. "Come in."

"Cap'n, we've some new crew members aboard." Hawes reported. "Pargo will scuttle the French ship. All our men are accounted for and back aboard."

"Let's set sail then. Follow the English merchant."

"Are we going to take her, sir?"

"We're escorting her to port in the Carolinas."

"Aye, Cap'n." As Hawes left, Jamie hurried in.

"Sir, the Spanish cap'n tossed this to me. Said it belonged to Miss Lizzie."

"What is it?" Lizzie asked.

Jamie handed her a velvet pouch.

When she opened it, her hand flew to her mouth. "It's my father's pocket watch."

Rourke took it from her. It was engraved on the back with the name Governor William Wickham. "Agustin must have taken it from him."

He handed it back to her, and she held it to her heart. "I will treasure it always."

"Is the deck clear?" Rourke asked Jamie.

"Aye, sir."

"We'll be underway then."

Jamie stood smiling at the two of them. Rourke shooed him back out the door, closing it behind him.

Lizzie gasped. "You're bleeding." She ran to his side. "Let me help you."

"It's nothing. A mere scratch."

"Let me clean it for you. Take your shirt off."

"Lass, if ye wish me to undress, ye doona need to find reasons. All ye must do is ask." He undid his shirt and winced as he shrugged out of it.

Lizzie had him sit with his back to her. "It's not deep," she reported.

"I told ye, 'tis a scratch."

She located a pitcher of water and poured some on the kerchief she'd been holding. "Let me know if I'm hurting you," she said.

Rourke laughed, but agreed. "I will."

With tender, light touches, she wiped away the blood.

"Ye've the hands of an angel, lass. I hardly felt a thing."

She dried it off. "I don't think it will bleed much more, but perhaps you should leave your shirt off for a while longer."

He turned to find her wearing a mischievous grin. "Come here," he ordered, and for once, she did as he said.



Chapter Thirteen

THEY ARRIVED IN the port of Charleston. Rourke gave his men leave to explore the city, but ordered they stay out of trouble. This wasn't Manta Cay or Scarba Island. It was best they not draw attention to themselves.

Rourke and Lizzie stood on the dock beside *The Rebecca*. They were joined by Captain Forsythe and the gentlemen who Rourke had met aboard the ship.

"I'd like to invite you and your lady to dine with us this evening," Captain Forsythe said.

"We'd be happy to join ye," Rourke answered.

They walked a short distance away from the docks and were met by a beautifully ornate carriage. Rourke helped Lizzie in and then sat beside her. The others joined them. All three squeezed into the bench across from them.

"We've not far to go," Captain Forsythe assured them, and he was true to his word.

In no time at all, they'd arrived at a fine home where they were greeted by the captain's wife, Caroline. She was a lovely woman with a warm smile who welcomed Lizzie by taking her hand and leading her into their drawing room where they were joined by the men. A servant appeared bearing a tray with glasses of sherry for each of them.

"Our meal will be served shortly, but I thought you might all enjoy a small drink before we eat," Caroline said.

"This is wonderful," Lizzie said. "An unexpected surprise."

"Have you been to Charleston before?" Captain Forsythe directed his question to Rourke and Lizzie.

"I've been a time or two," Rourke answered. "But I doona believe

Lizzie has been.”

“I’ve never visited,” Lizzie said.

“Then I hope you’ll enjoy your stay in our charming city,” Caroline said.

“I’m sure I will.” Lizzie glanced at Rourke, and he smiled reassuringly.

He couldn’t begin to imagine how Lizzie might be feeling. Everything that had happened since they’d left Manta Cay was completely out of the ordinary for her. He hoped she was enjoying her first adventure away from home.



THE DINING ROOM was lit with many candles. The table was set with fine china on a beautiful cream colored, lace cloth. The silverware was polished to a fine luster and placed beside each plate. The servants set a roast pheasant at the center of the table, accompanied by bread, rice, peas, corn, and turnips. Apple cider made by Caroline Forsythe was poured into pewter goblets.

“The meal is delicious,” Rourke said, directing his comment to Caroline.

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Yes. Everything is perfect,” Lizzie added.

“She is the perfect hostess,” Captain Forsythe said, raising a glass in her direction.

The others all followed suit, agreeing wholeheartedly.

Once the meal was done, the men all sat back in their chairs prepared to drink, smoke, and continue their conversation. Caroline motioned for Lizzie to join her in the drawing room.

“You have a beautiful home,” Lizzie noted. “Have you lived here long?”

“We’ve been in Charleston for about five years. It was difficult at first. I left my family home to be with John. I’d never spent any time away from my mother and father.”

“It must have been frightening,” Lizzie said.

“Yes, it was, but John was with me. My love for him gave me the strength to travel here. Now I love it here, and I wouldn’t wish to live anywhere else.”

Lizzie was enjoying Caroline’s company. There were no women like her on Manta Cay.

“Your husband is quite handsome,” Caroline said.

“Captain Mackall isn’t my husband,” Lizzie explained.

“Oh? Then you are to be married soon, I’m sure.”

“He hasn’t spoken of marriage.” Lizzie knew that to be unlikely

considering his life as a pirate.

“He will.”

The confidence of Caroline’s statement had Lizzie wondering if it was possible. “How can you be so sure?”

“I see the way he looks at you. It reminds me of my John,” she answered. “Your home is on Manta Cay?”

“Yes. My father was the governor.”

“Was?” Caroline asked.

“He is no longer with us. He has recently passed.” Lizzie wasn’t sure how much she should share with Caroline, so she left it at that.

“I’m so sorry.”

“My brother and I will have to find a new home once the new governor arrives.” This thought had been weighing heavily on her. When they got back to Manta Cay, she would have to start making plans for her and Daniel.

“Captain Mackall would be a fine governor,” Caroline said. “You could marry and then you wouldn’t have to leave.”

“I’m not sure he wishes to give up his life at sea.” *Or to marry.* She left that unsaid.

“I understand. I’m hoping that someday John will retire from life as a captain. I worry about him from the moment he leaves until he returns.”

Lizzie imagined she would have a lifetime of worrying about Rourke, who would undoubtedly leave her once he took her home. The thought saddened her. Now that she’d gotten to know the man he truly was, she wanted him in her life and couldn’t imagine what it would be like without him. Would she have to settle for an occasional visit when *The Dagger* made port in Manta Cay?



ROURKE AND THE men sat around the dining room table smoking and savoring their wine. He was enjoying the company of these gentlemen much more than he’d anticipated.

“You are welcome to stay here tonight, Mackall,” John Forsythe offered.

“We’ll return to the ship, but thank ye,” Rourke said.

“I’m curious about something,” John said.

Rourke waited to see what it was he would want to know. As a pirate, he was risking arrest being here in Charleston. He hoped by saving *The Rebecca*, he would be in the good graces of those he now sat with.

“Why did you go out of your way to save us? Surely it would have been a simple matter for you to take my ship and the French vessel

you were after. Wouldn't it have been more beneficial?"

"The French vessel was a personal vendetta for Pargo and for me. While it would have been easy work to take yer ship, it was not what we were after."

"And yet, you also escorted us to our home port." The sweet aroma of tobacco wafted from Forsythe's pipe as he puffed.

"I wished to see ye safely home considering ye helped us trap our prey." He took another sip of his wine.

"Just what did they do to deserve your wrath?"

"One of the men we sought killed Lizzie's father. He also stole Pargo's treasure."

"You weren't concerned with the treasure?" The two emissaries exchanged surprised glances.

"I only wished to avenge Governor Wickham's murder."

"Governor?"

"Yes. Lizzie's father was the governor of Manta Cay."

"They'll be in need of a new governor then."

"I imagine so," Rourke said. And Lizzie would be without a home.



ROURKE HAD AN unexpected surprise for Lizzie. She thought they'd be leaving Charleston this morning after just one night, but Rourke had different plans.

"It's time to get up." Rourke kissed Lizzie's forehead before she had a chance to roll away from him.

"I wish to sleep," Lizzie replied. "We were up late last night." She rolled back to face him.

"I remember," he replied.

She propped herself on his shoulder, staring up into his face. "Must we?"

"If ye wish to see more of Charleston, then we must." An involuntary *oof* erupted from Rourke's throat as Lizzie elbowed him in the gut on her way out of bed.

He attempted to protect the more sensitive places on his person from Lizzie's hands and feet. She was in such a hurry that she took little notice of where they were landing. He'd unleashed a whirlwind.

Lizzie was at the wash basin splashing cold water on her face, and then, just as quickly, slipping into her clothes. Before he knew it, she was standing beside the bed gazing down at him. "Get out of bed," Lizzie ordered. I wish to see all of Charleston today."

The excitement he saw in her eyes brought him great joy and he wondered what it might be like to have that kind of happiness every day. He had no time to dwell on his thoughts, though.

Lizzie pulled the blankets off of him and tossed his clothes onto the bed. She then paced back and forth across the room. "Where will we go first? Should we break our fast? How long will we be here?" She fired off questions in rapid succession.

He couldn't hold back his laughter. Lizzie's delirium was contagious. So with great haste, he made himself presentable before taking her in his arms and gazing down into eyes filled with eagerness.

"I think I've changed my mind. I'd rather stay here in my bed with ye," he teased.

"You wicked man. You know what my choice would be." Her lips turned up in a beguiling smile.

"Do I?"

She wrapped her arms around his waist. "You do."

"Charleston it is then." He did his best to maintain a stern demeanor.

Lizzie laughed, and his heart sang. He wondered when the treacherous pirate had been replaced by this lovesick fool.



HE'D BEEN TO Charleston over the years, but it seemed he would be seeing it for the first time today through the eyes of Lizzie Wickham. She was fascinated by everything. They broke their fast at a small inn and then walked along Broad Street where they explored many shops.

"Oh, Rourke, thank you. This has been so wonderful," Lizzie gushed.

"The day's not at an end yet," he replied, taking her hand and leading her into a small dress shop.

"Good day." The shopkeeper appeared from behind a stack of colorful fabrics.

"Good day," Rourke said. "I wish to purchase the lady some pretty dresses. What do ye have that would suit her?"

Lizzie's mouth fell open in surprise. "Rourke! You shouldn't."

"I should, and I will."

"Come with me, Miss." The shopkeeper led her to a curtained doorway. "Mary!"

"Yes, Samuel," A woman appeared from behind the curtain.

"This is my wife, Mary. She'll take your measurements."

Lizzie glanced back at Rourke. He gave her an encouraging smile as she passed through the curtain.

"Sir, perhaps you'd like to choose something for your wife."

Rourke didn't bother to correct him. It would cause less embarrassment for all if he let the shopkeepers think they were wed.

“Where will we start?”

“Color. What would you like?”

“I think a blue, like the sky and her eyes,” Rourke answered.

Lizzie emerged and joined him.

The man pulled out a dress of the most dazzling powder blue.

“This is a beauty,” he said.

“It surely is,” Rourke answered. “What do ye think, Lizzie? It matches yer eyes.”

“I don’t know what to say. I don’t believe I’ve ever owned anything quite so fine.”

“We’ll take it and another,” Rourke said. “Choose one, love.”

The man pulled out a beautiful rose-pink dress, and Lizzie nodded.

“Do you like this one?” she asked Rourke.

“I do. Ye’ve chosen well. We’ve a blue for yer eyes and now rose for yer lips.”

“Ye must be newly wed,” Mary said. “’Tis not often you hear a man say such lovely things to his wife.” She gave a pointed stare to her husband, who didn’t seem to hear her.

“Yes, we are,” Rourke answered.

Lizzie darted a glance in his direction. There was question in her eyes.

“’Tis best if they think we’re wed,” Rourke leaned in to whisper in her ear.

Lizzie nodded in understanding.

“Will they be ready tomorrow?” Rourke asked. “We’re only here for another day.”

“Yes. Around the noon hour,” Mary said.

“I’ll send one of my men to retrieve them.” He settled his bill with the shopkeeper and then escorted Lizzie back out onto the street.



HE’D TOLD THEM they were wed, if only it were true. Lizzie’s heart was so full of love for this man she thought it might burst. She turned to face him, wishing she could kiss him, but knowing that wouldn’t be proper. “Thank you, Rourke. You’re too kind and generous.”

“Not at all. It was a selfish pleasure I sought. To see ye happy does my heart good.” He placed his hand at the small of her back and guided her back to the skiff where Hawes and Jamie waited.

“Where are the rest of the men?” Rourke asked.

“Back aboard ship,” Hawes said.

“No trouble, I hope.”

“Not a bit, Cap’n.”

Rourke helped Lizzie into the skiff and joined her, followed by

Hawes and Jamie. The men, including Rourke, rowed back out into the harbor to the waiting Dagger.

Once aboard, Lizzie retired to the captain's quarters to rest. It had been a day she would never forget. Rourke would join her when he was done on deck, but until then, she was left alone with her thoughts. She'd spent the day with the man she loved. She hadn't told him yet, and she wasn't sure she should. From the beginning, it had always been clear he would be leaving. His life had no room for a wife, so despite the fact she'd been overjoyed to play at being Lizzie Mackall for this one day, it would end as soon as they returned to Manta Cay.

Despite that fact, Lizzie was enjoying her pretend marriage. If this was what married life was like, she was sorry there would be no husband in her life. How could she possibly marry after she'd known Rourke Mackall?

"Lizzie," the door opened and Rourke entered. 'Tis a beautiful night. Would ye care to sit with me on the quarter deck? There's not a cloud in the sky. The stars will shine bright."

"I'd love to," she replied.

He went to a cabinet behind his desk and removed a bottle of wine. "Pargo left me with this. It's from his own harvest. He gave me a bottle of brandy, as well."

"Are the two of you friends now?"

"There are few friends on the high seas, but it's possible if we meet again, things will be different between us." He took her hand and brought her outside. The sun was just starting to set and the sky was awash in the most beautiful shades of orange and yellow.

They sat on a small bench that looked out over the main deck. Rourke poured them both some wine, re-corked the bottle, and set it at his feet. Warm and gentle sea breezes caressed them.

Lizzie sipped her wine. "Mmm..."



"YOU LIKE IT," Rourke said. He then sipped his own. "Verra nice."

He considered himself a very lucky man to be here with Lizzie. They'd spent the night in each other's arms and would continue to do so. At least until they reached Manta Cay, and then some decisions would need to be made. He put that thought immediately out of his mind. He didn't want it to ruin their night.

Lizzie was gazing at him with what appeared to be love in her eyes. Or was he imagining things? It thrilled him to think that she did, but it would be best if she didn't. He knew he loved her, but he wouldn't tell her. It would only make things more difficult when he

had to leave her.

The last colorful streaks of the sunset were fading and the first stars were visible overhead.

“When you were a little boy and you dreamed of adventure, did you think it would be like this?” Her voice was filled with wonder as she gazed up into the night sky.

He thought about her question. “This has been perhaps the greatest adventure I could have wished for, but it is not the adventure I sought.”

Did she know he was speaking of her? That she was his greatest adventure? He hoped not. That knowledge was meant only for him. He placed an arm around her shoulders, and she snuggled in closer. The men on deck pretended not to notice them as they went about their duties. Jordy was on watch in the crow’s nest. Hawes was speaking with Lynk, and Jamie was asleep on the main deck just below where they sat.

It was one of those rare peaceful nights that was special. Rourke wished he could sit here forever with Lizzie. Perhaps if he wished upon a star it would happen. He looked up at the brightest one in the night sky, Sirius, and made his silent plea. For better or for worse, he wanted this woman who fit so perfectly at his side. He wanted more time with her. But how? That was a question he had no answer for.



LIZZIE WAS HAPPY to be home. It had been quite the adventure being away with Rourke. She had never spent any time off of the island and wasn’t sure she would again. Her hand rested on the lustrous silver locket Rourke had given her when they were entering Manta Cay’s harbor. He’d purchased it the day they’d spent on Broad Street, and she hadn’t even known it. A lock of his hair was nestled inside. She would wear it close to her heart for all of her days.

“Lizzie, where did you go?” Daniel asked. He’d run into her arms the moment he saw her and hadn’t left her side since.

“We went to Charleston,” she replied.

His eyes shone with excitement. “What was it like? Was it beautiful?”

“Very, but not as beautiful as Manta Cay,” she replied.

“I want to see it someday. Do you think I will?”

“I’m sure you will have many adventures when you are older.”

“I can hardly wait. Where is Rourke?” he asked.

“He is coming soon. He had some business to see to first, but he asked me to give you this.” She handed him a rolled up piece of parchment that was tied with a red ribbon.

“What is it?” he asked, looking up at her.

“I don’t know. You should open it.”

Daniel carefully untied the ribbon and unrolled the parchment. His eyes grew wide as its content was revealed.

“What is it?” Lizzie asked.

“It’s a map.”

“Let me see.” She peeked over his shoulder. “It’s a map of Charleston and the coast of the colonies.”

Daniel couldn’t seem to take his eyes from the map. His finger traced the lines of the coast and then stopped on Charleston Harbor. “This is where you were,” he said.

“Yes. Right there.” It was such a thoughtful gift, coming from a man who’d once craved adventure when he was Daniel’s age.

“Lizzie, are you going to marry Rourke?” Daniel asked.

“Oh, I don’t think so. He hasn’t asked me to be his wife.”

He seemed disappointed by her answer.

“He’s a man of the sea, Daniel. He wouldn’t be happy tied down to one place for his whole life.” She said this as much for herself as for her brother.

“He’ll come back to see us,” Daniel said, sounding very sure.

Lizzie wasn’t quite so sure, but it wasn’t something she wanted to dwell on.

“I’m going to bring this to my room.” He rolled up the map, securing it with the ribbon, and then bounded up the stairs to his room.

Left to think about her last days and nights with Rourke, Lizzie was filled with bittersweet memories. There was still a small flame of hope burning in her heart. Perhaps a miracle would occur, and Rourke would stay.



Chapter Fourteen

IN THE GOVERNOR'S study, Rourke removed the key from the small, intricately carved box. "We'll have to start searching for whatever this key fits," he said, holding it up and examining it.

"I'm hoping it will lead to a treasure of our own. Perhaps the extra taxes he was collecting. Why do you think he was doing it?" This truly puzzled Lizzie. She'd had time to get used to the fact that her father had been involved in things she was unaware of. It didn't diminish him in her eyes. He'd been a good father, and she would always love him.

"We may never know, but I think he was worried that someone back in England would discover that this island had become a haven for pirates and he would lose his position. If so, he'd have the silver he'd collected to help him start over."

"First thing tomorrow morning, I want to start looking. I'd like to build a home for Daniel and myself on Manta Cay." Lizzie knew it would be important for her to find another home. A new governor would arrive before too long. It was inevitable, and they wouldn't be able to stay in this house.

"We've searched the house from top to bottom and tried the key in every lock," Rourke said. "We have to put ourselves in William's shoes. If we do that, perhaps we'll have some luck, but in the meantime, I'm hungry."



"ARE YE SURE you wouldn't rather go back to England?" Rourke asked.

"This is my home. I wish to stay." Lizzie hated this conversation.

She knew it made so much more sense to let Rourke take them back to London, but she wouldn't even consider it.

"Where would ye like to build yer new home?" he asked.

"I think by the leeward cove among the trees." She smiled, remembering the last time she'd been there with Rourke. The glint in his eyes told her he was thinking the same.

"I'll have my men get to work creating a clearing. We'll use the wood to build it." He scooped the last bite on his plate into his mouth and then set his fork down.

"It doesn't have to be a big house," she said, thinking it would be a lot of work to build something large.

"It can be any size ye like," he assured her.

Guyton cleared the dishes from the table, and Rourke and Lizzie remained seated. Daniel was drawing a map. Ever since he'd received Rourke's gift, he'd been fascinated by maps and had taken to creating his own.

Rourke removed the small box containing the key and placed it on the table. "I can't believe that no one in this house knows what this key unlocks."

"I do." Daniel's head popped up.

"What?" Lizzie asked, not quite sure she'd heard him correctly.

"I know where the chest is that you're looking for."

"How do you know it's a chest?"

"I've seen it."

"Daniel, are you certain?"

"Yes. I followed Papa one day."

"What made ye do that, lad?" Rourke asked.

"I used to do it all the time. I would spy on him and see how long it was before he noticed me."

"Did he notice ye the day ye followed him to the chest?"

"No. Papa got the key from that box." He pointed to the box on the table. "Then he met a man. The same man that was with Pargo."

"Agustin?" Rourke asked.

Daniel nodded. "They went into a cave near the cove. I hid behind a tree and waited for them to come out. I was going to follow him, but I knew he'd be coming back here. Once I was sure they'd left, I went in. It was dark, but they left a candle burning. Papa must have forgotten to blow it out. There is a big chest there."

"Will ye show us?" Rourke asked.

"It's still light enough for us to find our way," Daniel said.

Lizzie grabbed some candles to light once they were at the cave.

Daniel put his things away and then taking Lizzie's hand, headed out the back door of the house. They traversed a narrow, sandy path that led far away from the house where the path began to climb

steeply.

"It's not much farther," Daniel said, releasing Lizzie's hand and running ahead of them. He stopped at a thicket of shrubs and waited for them. It's in here."

Lizzie couldn't see anything. "Daniel, are you playing a trick on us?"

"No. Look." He pulled at what appeared to be dead branches, moving them away, and there it was, the opening to a cave.

Rourke lit the candles. He handed one to Lizzie. "Follow me."

The trio entered the cave. The candles gave them just enough light to see the chest which had been placed up against the back wall, but as they approached, it was apparent that someone had broken it open and taken everything. The lock lay at their feet.

Rourke tried the key and it was a perfect fit. "Agustin."

"Now what will we do?" Lizzie asked.

Rourke didn't have an answer for that. "We'll think of something," he said. He had treasure of his own that he would retrieve for her. "Come. Let's go back."



LIZZIE WRAPPED AN arm around Daniel's shoulders. Her head was full of disappointment and questions without answers. Perhaps she should let Rourke take them to London. It would be best for Daniel. He'd have a decent home, or so she imagined. Her father had never mentioned anything at all about this family he wanted her to join. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got. Why should she have to leave this beautiful place?

"Don't worry, Lizzie. I'll take care of ye," Rourke said.

"I don't wish to be a burden to you," she said.

"Ye wouldn't be a burden. We'll build yer home so ye and Daniel will have a place of yer own. Ye can stay in the governor's mansion until the new governor arrives."

"When will that be? Will there be enough time to build our home?"

"There's no telling when the new governor will show up, but my men will make quick work of a home for ye."

Lizzie stopped to look at him. To search his eyes for the answer she sought. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I care about ye." Rourke cupped her chin in his hand. "I can no' help myself." He took her hand, and they all walked back to the house together.

She held back the biting, stinging tears that would otherwise burst from her eyes. How was it possible to care about someone so much, to

care the way Rourke cared for her, and to still sail away? She had no answer. All she knew was that when it was time for him to leave, she wouldn't beg him to stay. She'd be happy with her memories of him and perhaps the hope of an occasional visit.

They reached the back door through the herb garden. Daniel ran inside.

"I have to get back to *The Dagger*. I'll move her into the cove, and tomorrow morning, the men will get started clearing trees. Will ye meet me there?"

"I will."

He dipped his head and gently brushed her lips with his as if he were afraid to do anything more as it might delay his departure.



TUCKING DANIEL IN for the night, Lizzie had just finished reading to him and kissed him goodnight.

"Don't worry, Lizzie. We'll be fine without Papa."

Such wise words from a young boy. She smiled warmly and kissed his forehead. "I promise not to worry. Good night."

Once back in her own room, Lizzie undressed and slipped into bed. It felt empty without Rourke by her side. These past days had been a revelation to her. There was more to life than only being a daughter and a sister. She'd only begun to taste the freedom that was at her feet. It was a freedom that could be taken away as quickly as it had come, but she would hold onto it while she could.

Tomorrow morning, she would meet Rourke and show him where she wished to live. She could stay on Manta Cay. Away from the docks and the town, there was no longer anyone to tell her what to do.



ROURKE ARRIVED AT the docks, but Hawes was nowhere in sight. He would be forced to wait for him. He scanned the water, searching for his skiff, but instead, he saw an unfamiliar ship arriving in port. It flew no flag, so he could not tell if it was friend or foe, pirate or warship. It dropped anchor perhaps a bit too close to *The Dagger*, which concerned Rourke. He glanced around again, feeling agitated. Where was Hawes?

"Cap'n," Hawes's voice came from behind him.

"Where have ye been? Where is the skiff?"

"I was at Red Legs. The skiff is there." He pointed away from the docks to a sandy area where the boat had been pulled up on shore.

"Where's Jamie?"

“Asleep in the boat I’d guess. He was to watch fer ye.”

The two men made their way to the skiff. Hawes grabbed an empty bucket from nearby and filled it with water. He dumped it on Jamie who sputtered. He sat up and looked into the faces of Hawes and his captain.

“I give ye a job to do and ye fall asleep.” Hawes grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him from the skiff.

“I’m sorry. The sun made me sleep.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Rourke said as Hawes was about to kick Jamie in the arse. “There’s a ship anchored too close for comfort. See it there.” He pointed at the unknown vessel.

“Who the bloody hell is it?” Hawes peered out over the water.

“They fly no flag.”

Hawes dumped Jamie back in the skiff and climbed in. “We’d best hie to it, Cap’n.”

Rourke pushed the boat out into the water and hopped aboard.

“Sorry, Cap’n. I should be the one doin’ that, but I be so, so... The bastards mean to board us,” Hawes shouted.

Rourke saw no evidence that was their intention. “Calm yerself, Hawes. We doona ken what they’re about.”

“We’ll be finding out soon enough,” he said, rowing furiously.

Rourke and Jamie exchanged quizzical looks, but did their best to keep up with him. Hawes was propelling them through the water faster than seemed possible.

“Slow yerself man, else we pass the ship by,” Rourke commanded.

Hawes stopped rowing, and the skiff glided to a stop at the base of the rope ladder.

“Captain Macall!”

The voice came from the neighboring ship.

“Aye. Who calls me?”

“’Tis Abner Granville from *The Rebecca*. I’d have a word with you, if you please.”

“What does he want?” Hawes asked.

“I don’t know. He risks a great deal to be here in the harbor.”

“Aye. That he does.”

“Row me over and wait for me.”

Rourke climbed aboard the ship, unsure if he would find himself in shackles once on deck.

“Good to see you again, Mackall.” He extended a hand, which Rourke accepted.

“Granville. What are ye doing here? Surely ye ken ye’re in danger here.”

“We hope you will extend your protection once again.”

“I’ll do my best.”

"I've word about the governor," Granville said.

"The deceased, or the one to come?"

"Both," he replied. "You can tell your man he can leave. We will see you get back to your ship. We've much to discuss. Michael is in the captain's quarters waiting for us."

Rourke went to the rail and looking over, caught Hawes attention. "Go back to *The Dagger*."

"Sir?"

"Ye heard me. I'll return later."

Hawes gazed up at Rourke, looking like he might disobey, but Jamie picked up the oars and started rowing. He had no choice but to join him.

Rourke felt surprisingly like a man about to attend his own hanging. Abner chatted happily about the weather, ship, and any number of other things that Rourke barely heard.

They reached the cabin door where Abner opened it and waited for Rourke. "After you, sir."



Chapter Fifteen

LIZZIE COULDN'T IMAGINE where Rourke was. He'd asked her to meet him here, but he was nowhere to be seen among the men who had just arrived on shore.

"Hawes," Lizzie ran to meet him. "Where's Rourke?"

"I've no' seen him. He told us we were to be here this mornin' to help clear some trees, but he was no' in his quarters this mornin'."

"And you don't know where he could be?" Lizzie was puzzled by his answer.

"No, Miss. He boarded a ship anchored next to *The Dagger* yesterday. Seemed he knew the cap'n."

The men around them unloaded supplies from the boats and headed toward the trees.

"He didn't come back? And you didn't go after him?" She could hear the panic in her own voice. Something was wrong, and Hawes didn't seem bothered by it.

"He sent us away. The ship was still there this morn." He was looking past her now, toward his men.

This was concerning. Lizzie didn't know what to do. Should she go look for him or stay here and wait.

"He'll be along, Miss, like he said he would," Hawes assured her. She nodded, feeling uneasy.

"Where is this house of yers goin' to sit?" he asked.

"Over here." She led Hawes to the area where she wanted her home to be.

"We'll get to work. Ye should sit over here." He took her to a fallen log closer to the water. "Wouldn't want a tree fallin' on ye."

He wandered off and began shouting orders.

Lizzie sat on the log staring out at the ocean. She'd missed Rourke

last night and was looking forward to seeing him this morning. But now he was not only missing from the beach, but he was apparently missing from *The Dagger*.

The men began felling trees, but Lizzie's heart was no longer in it. What was supposed to be the beginning of her new life now felt less exciting and more daunting without Rourke's presence.

When the last tree had been cleared, Hawes signaled the men to head back to their boats.

"We're done for the day, Miss," he reported.

"Thank you, Hawes," she said as he began to walk away. "If Rourke comes back, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Aye. Ye've my word." He gave a short wave to her and was off.

She headed back home with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, unsure of so many things.



THE NEXT MORNING, the men were back at work, but this time, Rourke and Hawes were both missing. Something wasn't right.

She searched the group until she saw Jamie among them.

"Where is Hawes?" she asked him.

"Cap'n Mackall needed him aboard ship," he said.

"Captain Mackall is back?" Relief swept through her, replaced by a new concern.

"Aye, Miss. Last night." He cocked his head to the side. "Be ye well?"

Lizzie absently nodded. "Yes, fine. Do you know where he was?"

"No one does, Miss." Jamie wandered a little way off down the beach, picking up stones and lobbing them into the waves and then running up to help the men as they worked.

She took her seat on the log. Yesterday she'd been worried for Rourke's safety. Today she was angry. She hadn't seen him two mornings in a row without explanation. If he didn't wish to see her again, he should tell her.

"Lizzie," Daniel ran toward her wearing a huge smile.

"Daniel what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see where we would live. I followed you." He turned to watch the men at work, moving the trees they'd felled yesterday.

"You are very good at that game, Daniel, but if you want to come with me, you only need ask."

"It's more fun my way," Daniel said.

"Who is this, Miss?" Jamie joined her.

"It's my brother, Daniel. You haven't met him yet, have you?"

"I haven't." The boys were close in age. Jamie was probably about

three years older than Daniel, who was ten, but he was more worldly. "The men have shooed me away. Said I was makin' more work for 'em."

"Shall we walk down the beach then?" Lizzie asked.

"We can search for shells," Daniel said.

He and Jamie were off down the beach before she could even stand up. She followed after them, a smile on her face. Daniel needed a friend. He spent so much time alone or with Guyton. There were no other children on the island that she was aware of.

"Look!" Daniel was pointing out to the water.

Lizzie shielded her eyes and watched as a skiff approached the beach.

"It's Cap'n Mackall," Jamie said, running back to her.

Relief flooded through her as he hopped out and, helped by Hawes, pulled the boat ashore. The sight of him flooded her senses with warmth and love. He waved to her as he was joined by Hawes.

She couldn't hear what he was saying, but after a lengthy discussion, Hawes called the men back to the boats where they boarded and began rowing away. Rourke watched them go before turning toward her.

"Jamie, ye stay with Daniel. I'll call to ye when ye can come back," Rourke shouted.

"Aye, Cap'n."

The two boys ran off down the beach together, leaving Lizzie alone and confused.

"Why did you send the men away?" she asked as Rourke approached.

"I needed them on *The Dagger*," he explained.

She couldn't read the look in his eyes.

"You're leaving?" She knew he would eventually, but why did it have to be today?

"No. I've news," he said, moving closer.

Lizzie backed away. "Oh." She'd missed him and so wanted to feel his touch, but she kept her distance. "What is it?"

In two strides, he was holding her in his arms. "I missed ye, Lizzie."

"Where have you been? I was worried about you." All of her angst and anger came out in those words.

"I'm sorry, but I had good reason."

She waited for him to continue.

"I was busy securing our future," he said with a smile.

She'd never seen him grin that way before. The dimples in his cheeks were more pronounced, his eyes twinkled with happiness, and he looked even more handsome than usual, if that were possible.

“Our future?” Lizzie stopped. “What are you saying?”

“I love ye. I wish ye to be my wife.”

She thought she might be hearing things. “Are you sure?”

Rourke laughed. “I’m verra sure.”

“Where will we live?” she asked. “You’ve sent the men away.” She’d heard what he said, but had been caught so off guard, that all she could think about was the house that wasn’t being built.

“We will live at the governor’s mansion.”

It made no sense to her. He knew they couldn’t stay there. “But, we’ll have to leave when the new governor arrives.”

“That’s what I came to tell you. He’s here.”

Rourke was filled with a joy that Lizzie couldn’t comprehend. Why was he so happy? “What?” She couldn’t be more confused. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ll explain, but first what do ye say? Will ye be my wife?”

“I love you, Rourke. Yes, I will. I will be your wife.” Shaking off all the worry and confusion, Lizzie couldn’t contain her excitement a moment longer as she leapt into his arms. He spun her around and then gently set her down.

“Come here, lads,” Rourke called to Daniel and Jamie. “Yer sister has agreed to be my wife.” Rourke pulled all of them, including Jamie, into a hug.

Daniel’s muffled voice said, “We’re going to be a family.”

“We are,” Lizzie said, warm, happy tears forming in her eyes.

“Ye, too, Jamie,” Rourke said, ruffling his hair.

“I’ve never had a family,” he said with a huge grin.

“Now you do,” Lizzie said.

“Shall we go home?” Rourke asked.

“Wait,” Lizzie stopped. “You had something else to tell me. You said the governor was here on the island.”

“He is.”

“Who is it? Is he at the house?” What would they do when he arrived? Where would they go?

“Not yet.” He took a deep breath before speaking again. “Lizzie, I’ve been appointed governor of Manta Cay.”

“What? How?” If she was confused before, she was even more so now.

“Ye remember the gentlemen we met in Charleston, Abner and Michael? They are the king’s emissaries. They were in Charleston to meet with the governor there and will visit others as well. After much discussion, they decided I should be made governor here as a reward for aiding them in their hour of need. We spoke at great length in Charleston while ye were with Caroline Forsythe. They said they were impressed by me and felt if anyone could govern this island, it would

be me. They will tell the king of their decision when they return to England, omitting a few minor details, of course.”

“You mean that you’re a pirate,” Lizzie said.

“Was a pirate.”

“No longer?”

“Of course, I had to assure them I would no longer be the captain of a pirate ship.”

Jamie’s mouth hung open on hearing this.

“*The Dagger’s* new home will be Manta Cay. She will remain my ship, but Hawes will be the new captain. Lynk will be his first mate, and Jordy will likely be the quartermaster. I could no’ ask the men to give up their livelihood, but I will no longer be involved.”

“I can’t believe you’d give it all up. I thought you loved the adventure of the open sea.” Lizzie said.

“Ye are my new adventure, Lizzie. Ye’ve owned my heart from the moment I set eyes on ye, and I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my days with ye.”



Epilogue

Manta Cay, six months later

LIZZIE AND ROURKE strolled hand-in-hand down the beach of their private cove. They'd built a one-room cottage that was their own special hideaway. A place they could go when they wished to be alone and unbothered by happenings on the island.

"I am so happy and at peace here," Rourke said, squeezing her hand.

Lizzie smiled. She was, too. "So, what do you think of my plan to make Manta Cay more like Charleston?"

"It's a fine plan, but what are your reasons?" He was proving to be a good governor for the island. He was meticulous with the records he kept and fair in his dealings with the ship captains who anchored in his port.

Lizzie had good reasons for wanting to improve the island, but one in particular that she hadn't shared with him yet. She was pregnant and had vowed that if she had a daughter, she didn't want to keep her from exploring all of Manta Cay. She wanted her to have a freedom that Lizzie hadn't known until now. "We would attract more residents. Sugar cane is an abundant crop in the Caribbean. Those who have shown an interest in starting plantations would want a thriving town that would serve everyone's needs."

"What of the pirates?" he asked.

"They could stay, but with the understanding they were to keep away from those who were not pirates. The docks and town could remain for them to inhabit, but we could open up another part of the island for everyone else. What do you think? We could have a Broad Street of our own with merchants and craftsmen. Even an inn or two."

"It sounds as if ye've given this a lot of thought," Rourke said.

"I have," she replied. "Manta Cay can be a very lonely place to grow up." She spoke from experience. "I want Daniel and Jamie to have friends and a tutor if possible."

"They've become close. Almost brothers." Rourke bent down and picked up a perfectly-shaped conch shell. He examined it before placing it in his pocket. "For Daniel."

He was such a thoughtful man. Daniel had taken an interest in sketching the natural flora and fauna of the island. "He'll be pleased," she said. Lizzie felt blessed that she and Rourke had found each other and now had a lifetime of love ahead of them.

"I've been thinking," Rourke began. "At a future time, would ye like to sail to Dunnet Head with me? I'd like ye to meet my family. It's been far too long since I've seen them, and I want them to know they can be proud of the man I've become."

"I would love nothing more." She smiled up at him.

"We would wait until our...yer plans for Manta Cay have begun to take shape, of course." He stopped and turned her to face him before wrapping his arms around her waist.

"They would be your plans as well, sir," she said.

"There are times when I think ye would have been a better choice for governor."

"Don't be silly. You are, of course, the governor, and I am here to help you in any way I can."

"We will be governor together, then," he chuckled.

"That could be the best idea you've had to this point."

"I've had many good ideas, not the least of which was to wed the most beautiful, clever woman I've ever known." He touched a finger to her nose, causing a giggle to escape her lips.

What could she say to that? His words warmed her heart. "I am a lucky woman."

They turned back, having walked a good distance from their little cottage. The waves lapped at their bare feet and the bright sunshine warmed their faces. "Shall we go nap?" He feigned a yawn.

"A big, strong man like you, tired in the middle of the afternoon? I don't believe it." A knowing smile lit her face.

"Tis almost unbelievable, but true nonetheless." He gave her a devilish wink.

He unlatched the door, enabling her to enter before him. The windows were open, allowing the sunlight to filter through along with a soft breeze that kept the room from being overly warm. Rourke stretched out on the bed and held out his arms to Lizzie. She wasted no time joining him.

"Rourke, you are going to be a good father," Lizzie said.

"Well, then we'd best get to work." He pulled her close, nuzzling

her neck with his nose.

“You’ve already done good work, husband.” She pushed back so she could see his face. It took a moment before he understood her meaning.

“Are ye?” he asked.

“Yes, my love. I believe we’ll have a daughter some time this winter.”

“Daughter? How do ye ken it will no’ be a son?” he said, his eyes wide.

“’Tis only a feeling I have.”

“Am I really to be a father? Or is this a dream?”

She cradled his face in her hands. “You are awake. This is no dream,” she assured him.

“Come to me wife. I wish ye to ken how much I love ye.”

She happily surrendered herself to him as she knew she would do all the days of her life.

THE END

About the Author

Jennae Vale is a best selling author of romance with a touch of magic. As a history buff from an early age, Jennae often found herself daydreaming in history class and wondering what it would be like to live in the places and time periods she was learning about. Writing time travel romance has given her an opportunity to take those daydreams and turn them into stories to share with readers everywhere.

Originally from the Boston area, Jennae now lives in the San Francisco Bay area, where some of her characters also reside. When Jennae isn't writing, she enjoys spending time with her family and her pets, and daydreaming, of course.

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